

10 BEST GAMES OF THE YEAR

Computer Games

NO. 148 / MARCH 2003

RENDERING RUMBLE

The year in video cards
All tested and rated

PREVIEWED

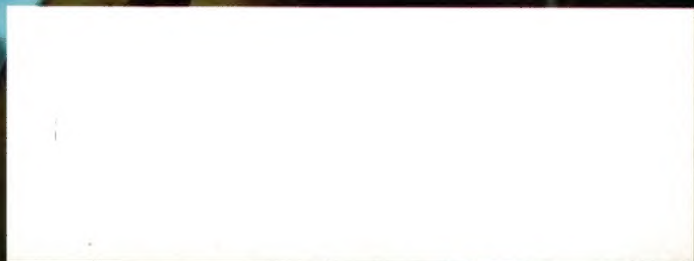
Everquest II
Planetside
Condition Zero
Devastation
Black Hawk Down
and more

FREELANCER

*The complete story on Microsoft's
long-delayed sci-fi sim*

SPECIAL REPORT

Griefers: The players that
ruin online gaming



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GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS



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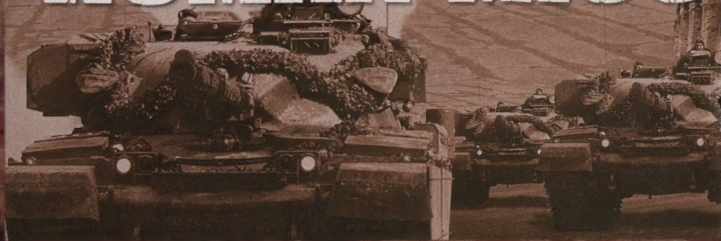
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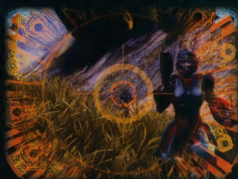
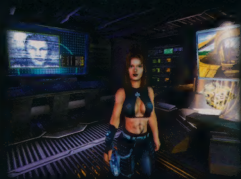


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Unreal III

THE AWAKENING

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ATARI

CONTENTS

cgm • Issue 148

50 COVER STORY

Countdown

Their six-year mission: to make a new game in an old genre. Digital Anvil's Freelancer finally gets ready to launch
BY TOM CHICK

Best of the Year 2002

The year's Top 10 games, top hardware, the 5 worst, and lots more serious and silly awards — 58
BY STAFF

Good Grief!

Annoying other players as entertainment: The world of the grievers, and the dark side of playing online— 62
BY ROBERT MAYER



23



32



76

50

NEWSWIRE

- 22 Thousands Flock to Dallas for Cybering**
The Cyberathlete Professional League closes its 2002 season in style
BY KEVIN RICE

- 23 No Fun League**
The NFL looks to sack video football violence
BY ANDREW BUB

- 26 Speed Racer**
NASCAR Racer Dale Earnhardt, Jr. lives for thrills
BY SCOTT STEINBERG

- 26 The Final Lap**
Papyrus Racing Games bids adieu to its legacy of PC NASCAR games
BY CINDY YANG

- 30 Newsbytes**
Top Sellers and Spotlight

Gothic II	34
Harpoon 4	46
Planetside	48
Post Mortem	36
Praetorians	39
Ultima Online: Age of Shadows	40

HARDWARE

- 66 Technicalities**
Resolutions—I wish developers would make a few promises for the new year
BY JASON CROSS

- 67 Q&A**
You have questions, we have answers.

- 68 Rendering Rumble**
2002: The year that was in video cards
BY JASON CROSS

Reviews:	
ECCI E-3000 Pedals	74
Logitech MOMO Force Feedback	74
Logitech Freedom X.24	74

REVIEWS

- 76 Asheron's Call 2: Fallen Kings**
The best leveling treadmill money can buy
BY BENJAMIN E. SONES

Also Reviewed	
Archangel	84
Armored Task Force	89
Cossacks: Back to War	85
FIFA 2003	84
Fighter Ace	83
Hearts of Iron	78
Hegemonia	79

PREVIEWS

- 32 Spellbinding**
Fantasy epic EverQuest II endeavors to enchant
BY SCOTT STEINBERG

Also Previewed:	
Counter-strike Condition Zero	41
Delta Force: Black Hawk Down	38
Devastation	44
Galactic Civilizations	47
Gods & Generals	42



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Online Subscriptions: www.cgonline.com

subscriptions@cgonline.com

PO Box 1965, Marion, OH 43068-0665

One year (12 issues) Basic Rate

US: \$19.97 or \$29.97 with CD

Canada: \$31.97 or \$41.97 with CD

Foreign: \$43.97 or \$53.97 with CD

Back issues available @ 800-699-4263

Distributor: Curtis Circulation Co.

201-634-7400

Reprints available. Foreign reprint rights available.

Editorial Offices: 65 Millet Street, Suite 203

Richmond, VT 05477

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78

Neocron.....	82
Platoon.....	90
Shadowflame.....	88
Sims Unleashed.....	80
WWE Raw.....	89
WWII: Panzer Claws.....	81
Zoo Tycoon Marine Mania.....	80

AFTERLIFE

92 Out of the Box

Modding Off to War—The mod community signs up with Battlefield 1942

BY BRETT TODD

DEPARTMENTS

18 Upfront

What We Don't Like—A peek into the dark mind of the gamer

BY STEVE BAUMAN



79

94 Rebound

It's Rings & Things, and Pure Sex!

96 Road to Nowhere

Killer Kids—How the videogame industry trains the next generation of snipers

BY CINDY YANS

98 Inside the Sausage Factory

My First Decade—10 years of Jerry Lewis, Showbiz, and trade show drinking contests

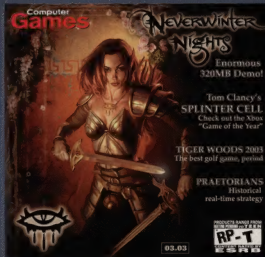
BY PHIL STEINMEYER

100 Three Finger Salute

Dead Again—The annual "PC gaming is dead" knell

BY TOM CHICK

THIS MONTH'S DEMO CD



One of the Year's Best

BioWare finally releases a demo of Neverwinter Nights, and it's big. Big as in 300MB big. Much like the Baldur's Gate demo, it's the entire first part of the game; if you're on the fence about whether to buy it or not, give it a try.

Also this month:

Praetorians

Tiger Woods 2003

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell

Plus wallpapers from Lord of the Rings, Splinter Cell, Colin McRae Rally, 007 Nightfire, Robin Hood, and more.

INSTRUCTIONS: The disc should autoplay once placed in your CD-ROM. If it does not, double-click on CGCD.EXE to launch the interface. If you have a defective CD-ROM, a replacement can be obtained by sending the original to: Computer Games, ATTN: CD Replacement, 65 Millet St. Richmond, VT 05477.

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WORDS



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the threat



WORDS LIKE:
"CARPET BOMBING," "SCUD LAUNCHERS"



BY PETER CROSBY

Recent military aggressions around the globe have many nations worried. Between the United States, China and the Global Liberation Army, tensions run high. Their leaders profess no interest in escalating the situation, but words ring hollow when satellite photos tell a different story. The issue is no longer "Will there be military conflict?" but, "Who will prevail?"



Violence





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February 11th, 2003



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Violence

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upfront

what we don't like

A peek into the dark mind of the gamer

How we see PC gaming today:

We don't like developers and publishers that make games that pander to the lowest common denominator.

We also don't like developers and publishers that ignore fan input and refuse to listen to all feedback.

We don't like it when companies produce half-assed sequels and remakes that feel like glorified add-ons.

We also don't like sequels and remakes that deviate too much from what made the originals so entertaining.

We don't like games that don't have demos because it means the developer and publishers are hiding something.

We also don't like demos released after the game ships because it means the developer and publishers are hiding something.

We don't like games that play identically to one another.

We also don't like games that feature unusually perplexing game-play mechanics or interfaces.

We don't like dumbed down games that abstract the important details in order to capture some sort of mass-market audience.

We also don't like overly complex games that substitute detail for

So ask yourself: Do we still like games?

depth in order to appease some vocal minority of players.

We don't like games that don't feature original settings or characters.

We also don't like games that are weird, with strange and unfamiliar settings.

We don't like simulations that throw realism to the wind.

We also don't like simulations that get bogged down in complexity.

We don't like it when developers stop supporting their games by failing to deliver all sort of free content.

We also don't like it when developers milk a product for years by only releasing free content for their games.

We don't like it that originality isn't rewarded with sales, and that our favorite games don't necessarily sell particularly well.

We also don't like to spend money on games we're not sure we'll already like.

We don't like reviews that bow to public opinion and buy into hype.

We also don't like reviews we don't agree with.

We don't like games that are full of bugs or refuse to run on our machines.

We also don't like games that miss their target ship date or require any patching.

We don't like restrictive, closed computer systems, where the freedom to purchase whatever hardware we want from as many different companies as possible isn't even an option.

We also don't like games with hardware incompatibilities.

We don't like games that have ridiculously high system requirements, ones which virtually scream, "Upgrade your computer to play me."

We also don't like games that don't take advantage of the latest and greatest hardware we've just purchased.

We don't like developers that call attention to themselves by constantly giving interviews, posting on message boards, or boasting about their past games.

We also don't like developers that refuse to post on message boards or are dull and quiet in interviews.

We don't like reviews that aren't detailed, informative, and that don't cover every aspect of a game, including both its single- and multiplayer modes.

We also don't like reviews to appear too late after a game's released.

We don't like previews that refuse to criticize pre-release versions of games.

We also don't like reviews of pre-release versions of games.

We don't like massively popular games like *The Sims*, and constantly make fun of them and their audience.

Finally, we also don't like it that companies consider PC games a niche.

So ask yourself: Do we still like games?

The idea for this column was shamelessly ripped from "The mind of the harried fan," by ESPN Page 2 columnist Jim Caple. •

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throughout Italy. Reports continue to stream
in of never-before-seen tanks and bombers
joining the conflict, a total of 43
military assault vehicles at last count.

BATTLEFIELD

★ ★ ★ 1942 ★ ★ ★

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Intel suggests the possibility of online
engagement with up to 64 soldiers of unknown
allegiance. Armed resistance is expected
to be fierce utilising any combination of
23 lethal weapons. These battles are huge.
But then again so is the prize: Victory.



Violence





Thousands Flock to Dallas for Cybering

The Cyberathlete Professional League closes its 2002 season in style

by Kevin Rice

Like *QuakeCon*, but without *Quake*, or an hour-long over-your-head speech by John Carmack, the Cyberathlete Professional League holds an enormous LAN party a few times a year, and they pay the winners handsomely. According to its organizers, the 2002 event was the best-attended event yet. "We have around 1,400 people here from 24 countries this year," said Angel Muñoz, President of the CPL and the website *The Adrenaline Vault*. The event was well-organized, in contrast to past events that had contestants sleeping on the ground and mounds of wiring strewn along the floor. Instead, several booths were littered among rows of neatly set up and organized computers.

This year's main events were the \$100,000 *Counter-strike* tournament and the \$30,000 *Unreal Tournament 2003* competition, and there was even a \$10,000 *Team Fortress Classic* event for the old school crowd. Such large dividends have to come from somewhere, so in addition to the \$75 entry fee for competitors (\$25 for spectators), companies such as NVIDIA, Intel, EV, and CompUSA were showing their wares. Everyone was able to walk up to any booth and play the games they were running, including a fully playable *Unreal II* as well as other graphically impressive entries like *No One Lives Forever 2* and *RalliSport Challenge*.

Companies weren't just trying to get you interested in their products either. One evening, NetFire.com sponsored a viewing of *Spider-Man*, presumably for the four people in

attendance that hadn't seen it yet, and the next night, Bawls (the drink) sponsored an unofficial *Dance Dance Revolution* competition. If you've never seen somebody that's really, really good at that game, it's certainly a sight to behold.

Of course, the main event is on the last day, when they hold the finals and the tension runs high. If you've been reading this magazine for the last year or so, you'll notice a familiar name that keeps popping up at these competitions. Yes, the Britney Spears of professional gaming, fatality, has done it again. After coming in the top three at both *QuakeCon 2001* and *QuakeCon 2002*, Jonathan Wendell (his real name) walked away a winner in the *Unreal Tournament 2003* tournament. In fact, he has an agent and he's made over \$150,000 in the last two years. This is truly a Cyberathlete.

On the team-based side of things, the U.S. pulled off an upset akin to the 1980 Olympics hockey team. Everyone was expecting (and some were probably betting) on the Scandinavians to win, but in the \$100,000 *Counter-strike* competition, the US led Team 3D won. For *Team Fortress Classic*, Team Vindicate from the US defeated everyone.

Congratulations to all players in all the events are due, and after watching them do their thing, a profound sense of your own mediocrity overcomes you. Note to self: do not reveal your online name anymore. •

No Fun Allowed

The NFL looks to sack video football violence

by Andrew S. Bub

Is the National Football League trying to rain on, and reign in, the parade of violence in video game football? In early November, the NFL met with game publisher Midway Entertainment and reportedly asked for changes to the popular *NFL Blitz* series, according to CNN. *Blitz* is an arcade game that's hardly realistic. First downs are 40 yards, each team only fields six men, players burst into flame when "hot," and wrestling moves can be performed on rival players, even after the whistle, with appropriate color commentary that comments on the violence.

The controversy appears to have had sprung from a column written by Rick Reilly of *Sports Illustrated* earlier that month. In the column, "Robbing Darren to Pay Paul," Reilly observed that the NFL fines dangerous tackling while at the same time collecting lucrative licensing fees from videogames that allow, and in the case of *Blitz* encourage, that style of play. He noted that even in more serious simulations like EA Sports' *Madden* series, penalties can be turned off to allow late hits and illegal tackles. Reilly suggests, perhaps not entirely seriously, that this is hypocritical for the league (Reilly couldn't be reached for comment). He notes that Dallas Cowboy safety Darren Woodson raised this issue after receiving a \$75,000 fine for a helmet-to-helmet hit earlier in the season. But Reilly also quotes former Patriot's receiver Darryl Stingley, who was paralyzed by a hit from Oakland Raiders' Jack Tatum in 1978, as saying "It's



Will the NFL crack down on virtual big hits like this helmet-popping replay from Madden 2003?

marketing in 2002. Everybody wants to make it onto a greatest-hits tape," suggesting that maybe glory, or the ESPN *Sportcenter* highlight, could be the real culprit here.

The week Reilly's column appeared, former linebacker Howie Long noted on Fox's *NFL Sunday* that players are trained to hit hard, but are made aware what's a legal or illegal hit. The rest of the panel remarked that the rules and fines in the NFL product are

there for a good reason, to protect the players.

Is it hypocritical to expect an over-the-top NFL *Blitz* (rated "E for Everyone") to play by the same rules as a massive 300-

Is it hypocritical to expect an over-the-top NFL *Blitz* (rated "E for Everyone") to play by the same rules as a massive 300-pound lineman in the NFL?

pound lineman in the NFL? Without the late hits and outrageous antics, it wouldn't be much of an alternative to more realistic fare like *Madden* or *NFL Fever*. Midway offered "no comment" when asked about its meeting with the NFL, but it's hard not the think that softening the action in a game like *Blitz* only helps videogames become more of an example of the NFL becoming the "No Fun League." ●

NEWSBRIEFS

The Army Doesn't Train Snipers—The U.S. Army has added parental controls to *America's Army: Operations*. **DreamCatcher Snares Battlecruiser**—DreamCatcher Interactive will publish developer Derek Smart's next two *Battlecruiser* games. **Enclave Coming for PC**—Black Label Games will launch a PC version of *Enclave* in the spring. **New Laser Squad Race**—Codo Technologies will launch a fourth playable race for the play-by-email tactical warfare game *Laser Squad Nemesis*. **Starfleet Command Movie Tie-In**—Activision has released a single-player mission for *Star Fleet Command III* giving players control of Shinzon's ship, the Scorpion, from the movie. It's available



Star Fleet Command III

at www.activision.com. **PC Pro Race Driver in Surround-O-Sight**—Codemasters is supporting Surround Gaming which uses multiple monitors to display side views as well as the track ahead. **EA Starts Baseball Franchise**—EA Sports announced that they are putting to rest the *Triple Play* line and launching an *MVP Baseball* franchise. *MVP Baseball 2003* is expected to reach stores next summer, minus a PC version though. **Neverwinter Never Says Die**—BioWare and Atari have released the first installment of a free, downloadable module called *Witch's Wake*. It's available at www.bioware.com. News courtesy of Frictionless Insight (www.frictionlessinsight.com)

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Speed Racer

NASCAR Racer Dale Earnhardt, Jr. lives for thrills

by Scott Steinberg

Being a celebrity has its perks. Apart from the groupies and high society gallivanting, you can actually afford a decent gaming rig. "Around my home, processing power is in no short supply," laughs Dale Earnhardt, Jr., son of the NASCAR racing legend. "The PC is my favorite platform. I've got four computers linked to a T1 line. My buddies and I binge on multiplayer games all the time." A couple Busch Series championship seasons and an endorsement deal with InterAct Accessories will do that to a man, but so will a serious passion for blowing the crap out of anything that moves.

According to Earnhardt, he's been clocking in hours behind the monitor for years now. A personal collection of over 200 games stems all the way back to when Konami made its first run at publishing for the PC in the early '90s. *Frogger* sits high on the man's list of all-time favorites, but that doesn't mean he doesn't have room in his heart for newer, flashier (alright, more violent) action games. In fact, as of late, they've all but monopolized what little free time the athlete has.

"I can't stop playing *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*," moans the beleaguered star. "It's like an addiction." Ditto goes for *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, another recent favorite.

"[*Wolfenstein*] is great in solo mode. It's funny, because I used to hate single-player experiences, but a lot of titles have improved in this regard tremendously. Playing this and *Medal of Honor* alone with the lights turned low—it's out of control."

"We also play an awful lot of first-person shooters around here, like *Tom Clancy's Rogue Spear*," confesses Earnhardt. "I've had so much fun with this one in multi-player mode, it practically ruined me for all future solo gaming experiences."

Still, at least he knows how to blow off steam constructively—by

shooting helpless animals right in the gut. Quote Earnhardt, "Last night, a bunch of us played *Deer Hunter 2003*... it's pretty fun. The secret to winning is the rattles. Keep wailing on the call and the sumbitches come runnin'. Get 'em within 60 yards and you pop 'em. My dad was a big deer hunter. I used to go with him a few times. For the past few years I totally lost interest, though... and now here I am back behind the gun. That's PC gaming for you."

Maybe. But there are other, more constructive forms of interactive entertainment out there. Asked about any interests in sports simulations, he responded with enthusiastic praise for *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2003*. *NCAA Football* is another personal favorite he assures us, as was *Madden NFL*, at least until "one of my best buddies got so good at it that it sucked trying to beat him."

Although he insists that Papyrus is king of racing simulations on the PC—"they simply dominate, as *NASCAR Racing 2002 Season* proved"—Earnhardt doesn't take to the virtual track as readily as he does the real thing. When it comes to simulations, he much prefers a boxing ring to an oval one. "I really love the *Knockout Kings* series," explains Earnhardt. "Boxing games really do it for me. There haven't really been any good ones lately though, and never for the PC. I really wish they'd make one. Something realistic too... none of that cartoon crap."

That doesn't mean he'd settle for pansy ass rules and regulations if paid to design his own game, though—he'd take gamers right back into the thick of the Vietnam War. Pissed over how the Tom

Clancy games "haven't modeled a decent jungle map yet," Earnhardt swears he wants to make a first person shooter set amidst the underbrush. The way he explains it, it's an issue of cover: "Games



Earnhardt is a fan of games like *Medal of Honor* ...

...and Tiger Woods

with single hit kills aren't very fun when your ass is constantly poking out of the woodwork."

As a gaming enthusiast, you'd be right to assume that Earnhardt plays his fair share of console tiles as well. PlayStation 2 would be his particular system of choice. The reason? The variety of games available, naturally. Although he sees Xbox as better visually, as a true interactive entertainment aficionado at heart, gameplay is paramount in his world.

Or, to put it a bit more bluntly, "I tried to use the Xbox controller to play *NASCAR Thunder* and it was impossible. It's just too damn hard to work with, especially when you're playing a sports game and need to get to the buttons

fast. Screw that."

That said, don't be surprised one day to look up from the simulated tarmac to find you've been fragged by a good ol' Southern boy with too much time and money on his hands. Given such an obsession with multiplayer gaming, Earnhardt assures us it won't be long before he finds his way onto the Internet. And once he gets there, you'd best watch your mouth.

"I'm tired of people's misconceptions about NASCAR," glowers Earnhardt. "If coming from North Carolina and having a bit of an accent makes you a redneck, well, I guess I'm guilty. Don't think it means I'll be any less quick to put a bullet in your ass, though, soldier." ●



All of the cars and drivers of the 2003 season will be included. >>>This first-person view of the track is a pretty good indication of what "close quarters" you may get yourself into. >>> Much more "stuff" in the surrounding track area adds to the game's realism.

The Final Lap

Papyrus Racing Games bids adieu to its legacy of PC NASCAR games

by Cindy Yans

If you follow racing games, then you're no stranger to Papyrus, king of the NASCAR sim since 1994. Its latest venture—yet another *NASCAR Racing* <insert year here> *Season* game—will be its PC racing game swan song. With every series release, designers have raised the bar and set new standards for realism, visuals, and sound. And *NASCAR Racing 2003 Season* will most likely be no exception.

The game will enable you to race every track in the 2003 NASCAR Series, including the newly renovated Infineon Raceway and New Hampshire International Speedway. It'll also attempt to immerse you even more deeply with all the teams, drivers, and sponsors of the season. The 3D graphics provide not only wind-shield dirt and oil obstacles, but also sun glare that'll cause you to spin right into the wall if you're not careful. Technical partnerships with Goodyear and Jasper Motorsports have allowed the designers to provide an even further enhanced physics model that will be a more detailed representation of bumps, grooves, and diverse track surfaces.

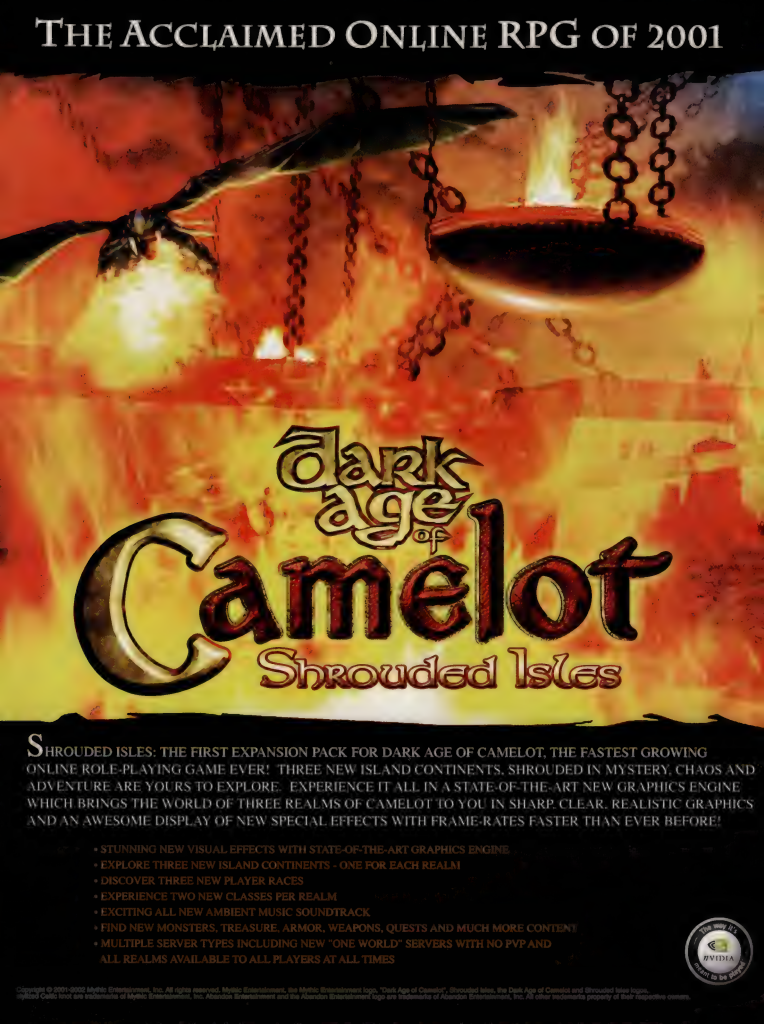
Papyrus indicates that novice drivers will have a much easier time than ever before. "We have a series of 10 driving tutorials that will help people become familiar with the basics of the game," says director of design and production Richard Yasi.

"Everything from car control to the rules of the sport is covered in the lessons, and once players have gone through them, they'll be much more prepared when they hit the track." Adaptive AI also allows newbies to experience fender to fender racing as the field automatically adjusts to their skill level. A populated pit road with team war wagons and pit signs, animated flags, aerial objects, much more effusive fan hubbub, and a full field of 42 cars during multiplayer might make racing at 193 MPH as realistic as tweezing nose hair.

Why did Papyrus decide to pack it in for its NASCAR PC line? Not surprisingly, it seems to be money over matter. "There are two trends that are influencing Papyrus' future direction," explains Yasi. "First, it's no secret that the game industry as a whole is migrating toward the consoles. That's where the big money is these days, especially now that those machines have online capability."

So the fans will have one last shot at a Papyrus PC moment in late February 2003, and then it's probably time for them to invest in a bleeding edge console—something that Yasi is confident they just might do. "NASCAR fans are known for their loyalty, and they have been loyal to us in terms of sales because they know that we sweat the details and we'll go the extra mile." ●

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Cliff Bleszinski
Game Designer, Epic Games

"I'm currently burning my way through *Metroid Prime* on the Gamecube. It is one of the few first person titles that I've played in recent years that strikes a great balance between action and exploration. Even then, Retro has done a great job of thinking outside of the first person view by allowing for creative third person segments with the morph ball. Next up is *Medal of Honor: Spearhead!*"

American McGee
Chief Creative Officer, carbon6, inc.

"Er, I'm not playing anything at the moment... That's not very exciting I know. I have just been too busy working on *Oz*, music videos, and other projects."



Rick Johnson
Lead Programmer, Raven Software

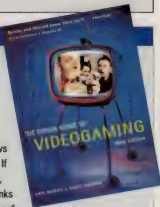
"I currently got myself addicted to *Dark Age of Camelot*. I've been slowly progressing a 22nd level troll warrior in the Midgard realm. I recently also finished *Dark Alliance* on the PS2 playing co-op with an old high school friend. I also play the old fashioned pen and paper 3rd Edition *D&D* with some friends at work."



SPOTLIGHT

Roughing It
Rough Guide to Videogaming
Penguin Books, Ltd. \$9.99

While typical Rough Guides point out the best restaurants in San Francisco or help you navigate the streets of Belize, the *Rough Guide to Videogaming* helps you navigate the frightening world of, you guessed it, videogaming. This tiny book is packed full of reviews broken down by genre, and has basic summaries of each platform. If only it was more useful. Almost every game gets a glowing review, and while it provides a few decent tips for each game, and some links to fan sites, it has no mention of this fine publication in its "Magazines" section. In fact, it omits all US-based PC game magazines. Come on, people, there's only three magazines in the United States covering PC gaming. Is it that hard to mention even one of us?



TOP SELLERS

- | | |
|----|---|
| 1 | THE SIMS VACATION
Electronic Arts
★★★★ |
| 2 | WARCRAFT III: REIGN OF CHAOS
Vivendi Universal
★★★★ |
| 3 | THE SIMS
Electronic Arts
★★★★½ |
| 4 | MEDAL OF HONOR: ALLIED ASSAULT
Electronic Arts
★★★★½ |
| 5 | THE SIMS HOT DATE
Electronic Arts
★★★★½ |
| 6 | HARRY POTTER & THE SORCERER'S STONE
Electronic Arts
★★½ |
| 7 | ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON
Infogrames
★★★★½ |
| 8 | THE SIMS UNLEASHED
Electronic Arts
★★★★½ |
| 9 | NEVERWINTER NIGHTS
Infogrames
★★★★ |
| 10 | ZOO TYCOON
Microsoft
★★★★½ |

Top sellers for the year through October 2002.

Source: NPD Techworld

Source: NPD Techworld

OFFBEAT ◀ ◻ ▶ ↗

Nostalgia Has Its Limits
TV Games Video Game System.
JAKKS Pacific, \$19.99

If you're of the opinion that old games are better than those being pumped out today, try the TV Games Video Game System. Consisting of an old-school Atari VCS joystick (the games and VCS emulator reside inside of it, making it slightly heavier than the original stick) and an audio/video output, it brings to life 10 classic Atari games of yore: *Adventure*, *Asteroids*, *Breakout*, *Centipede*, *Circus Atari*, *Greivitar*, *Missile Command*, *Pong*, *Real Sports*,

Volleyball, and *Yar's Revenge*. An Activision version includes *Pitfall*, *Atlantis*, *Boxing*, *Tennis*, *River Raid*, *Sputter Fight*, *Crackpots*, *Freeway*, *Ice Hockey*, and *Grand Prix*. Unfortunately, it comes housed in a gamepad where you press "Up" on the right D-pad to fire. The Atari one, with its old-school joystick, looks and feels cooler, but the Activision version has considerably better games. Regardless, after a few minutes with these quality games, you'll realize that they're all considerably worse than you remember. Nostalgia definitely has its limits.



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Spellbinding

Fantasy epic *EverQuest II* endeavors to enchant

by Scott Steinberg

Hack. Slash. Loot. Repeat. A seemingly innocuous play mechanic, but one that's served massively multi-player online games well since multi user dungeons were the cat's meow. *EverQuest*-the-Father will remain the progenitor of online 3D role-playing, and has a very strong following even still. But *EverQuest II* is on the way, and ups the ante on the core mechanic by tacking on slashes, swipes, and crushing blows that you can aim at any part of a foe's torso. But this is not the only thing that this evolving hero has up its voluminous sleeve, and that's simply all the more reason that longtime fans of Sony's game world might fall under its successor's spell when the product ships this Fall.

Sometimes, bigger is better

While adventuring in the newly introduced Age of Destiny, fans will find that Sony was actually listening

to their vocal customers' to-do list for the game. Almost everything they asked for, via wish list or complaint, has become reality. "The scale is much, much larger than anything previously modeled," says senior game designer Bill Trost. "So much so that even familiar areas take on a new life." For instance, wandering through the freshly redesigned Freeport, the architecture of which bears a strange mix of medieval and Arabic influences, you'll immediately notice how districts, market-places and zones are better defined—and more practically placed. Other locales, such as the marvelously malignant Cacic-Thule, sport less of a design change than cosmetic

overhaul, yet don't suffer for the oversight; good luck keeping your pants unsoiled as you wander labyrinthine stone halls bedecked in creeping vines and giant eyeballs that track your movement. Of course, what Trost doesn't also mention is that many of these previously encountered locales have undergone complete makeovers.

The Commonlands, for example, has achieved its full potential as a thriving savannah flush with sandy tracts, verdant grasslands, flowing rivers and majestic mountains rising in the distance. Likewise, visitors to the Grand Plateau will pleased with the fabulously arcane and newly revamped Erudite city of Erudin, which looks like it's been pulled straight from the pages of *The Arabian Nights*.

Fan Fare

Even more surprises await, such as a greater emphasis on politics, allowances for gladiatorial combat, and more efficient level design. "*EverQuest* was built piecemeal," explains Trost, about the sequel's improvements. "Now that we've got an established franchise and a foundation to build on, we're taking the time to make sure it's evenly



balanced and delivers more of the features fans have been clamoring for all this time."

At the very least, the enhancements will have the fan community in an uproar. Aspiring heroes will find an improved quest system in which you can acquire assignments at any time, and there are play mechanics that make finding a group much easier. These are welcome additions, but none will benefit so much from new features as simple socialites. Weddings, poetry readings, dramatic presentations—all are possible undertakings for players who are so inclined. Given the new tradesperson classifications, you can even avoid adventuring altogether, and make a comfortable life for yourself as a merchant or party promoter.

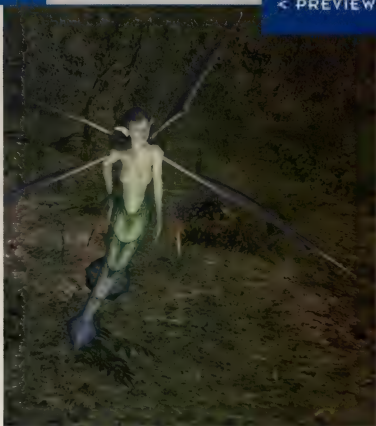
Granted, squirreling yourself away in a mundane career won't be the best way to appreciate the game's intricacies—or spot all the new content additions. Consider that only by traveling far afield will you encounter the Drafling Tower and the luminescent honeycombed Bixie beehive it houses. Upon being magically shrunk, visitors can explore an insectoid colony riddled with winding tunnels that eventually gives way to the grandiose palace which houses the Bixie Queen, a fully cognizant humanoid with the upper torso of a well-endowed female and abdomen of a bee.

Then there's Fallen Gate. Originally the foreign quarter for the thriving Dark Elf community of Nerlak, it's since been overrun by halfling commandos. Now a grim dungeon's halls echo with stirrs of memory, its dim, recessed corridors and purple-tinted hues casting a pallor over ruined huts, decrepit businesses, and shattered pillars—a chilling testament to the area's sordid past. No longer filled with the buzz of commerce, its cavernous chambers play host to the undead—former residents who rest uneasily within the sanctuary's dilapidated confines.

Picture Perfect

The spanking new engine cranks out the polygons like McDonald's does Big Macs. "No graphical limits have been built into the system," explains Trost, "so we can update textures as desired over the course of the game's lifespan, keeping pace as technology improves."

More importantly, it also makes for a more visually memorable gameplay experience. As one of 14 races ranging from Ogre to Kerran, Gnome and Troll, you can experience the stuff of which legendary ballads are made. Perhaps the bards will sing of your time in the newly introduced Castle Nektropolis, speaking of its twisted geometric architecture (an unintentional homage to *Dragon's Lair*), the very walls of the structure itself warped by wicked magic into wretched obscenities. Maybe instead they'll speak of its duels with creatures such as dragonfly faeries, zombies, minotaurs, and void beasts. Whatever the case, you can rest assured that when an earth elemental—a pile of moss-laden boulders gathered in roughly humanoid



form—comes rolling your way, it won't feel like your average role-playing encounter.

Ditto for bosses, who'd make even the most grizzled guildmasters wet their tunics. You're no hero until you've stood toe to claw with Darathar the Deceiver,

an awe-inspiring dragon who towers above even the tallest adversary. Only then will you know the meaning of fear. Or, if nothing else, the power of a high-end video card.

Although large parts of the game are still in flux, the title is finally coming together. And it doesn't take a sage—a new fortune-telling character kit that can assign quests to other players—to see the potential it holds. As Trost himself puts it, "EverQuest II is going to knock your socks off." The quest then will be to find them. ●



[opposite] Mushrooms in the New and Improved Nek Forest. >>> [top] One new creature type is the Nek Forest Fairy. >>> Waiting for the boat at Freeport will be much more pleasant with the renovated docks? Well, maybe.

Less is More

Gothic II shrugs off many of its particulars to welcome a fresh audience

by Cindy Yans

Piranha Bytes' *Gothic* received a fair amount of critical acclaim when it was released in 2001, heralded as having one of the most complete, involved, detail-oriented game worlds in recent memory. *Gothic II* will attempt to offer a more accessible game that still acts as a direct sequel to the first, and will ship early this spring in North America.

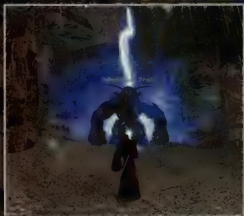
Welcome back to the Isle of Myrtana, where the story will now take place in the mining valley of Khorinis. After the area's farmers and escaped prisoners formed an alliance against the militia, the fate of all citizens is uncertain. You slip into the comfortable old leggings of the hero from the original, and again there is no character generation. Your choices during gameplay will evolve your character, a device that quite a few games (*Dungeon Siege*, for example) use in order to facilitate so-called "open gameplay." Of course, as always, it's up to you to conquer Evil and save the World.

Not surprisingly, the designers have tried to keep everything that you liked about *Gothic*, and to fix everything else. New AI will make

slaying the monsters a much more daunting task, and more non-player characters will find out about your activities and react accordingly. You can now forge your own weapons (provided you have learned how to deal with the blacksmith skill), brew your own potions, and create tailor-made magic runes. The thief is no longer the muddled, messy character that he was in *Gothic*, as they have fixed the pick-pocketing skill. Now he is way less likely to go undetected.

The expanded magic system has 50 defensive and destructive spells in seven "Circles of Power," which you're as likely to find as to purchase. Primary magic users, such as the Mage or the Paladin will be able to shape-change for both stealth and combat purposes. If they've smoothed out some of the more convoluted gameplay, and spiffed up the clunky interface, there's a decent chance that this version will attract a larger following. ●

An aerial view of the courtyard. >>> [inset below] A dark troll faces an even darker Mage. Spells of fire and ice will be prevalent. >>> [inset right] A force of Evil gets a hot foot. And he is not happy.



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New World Order

Counter Terrorism Combat



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More than Nearly Headless

Post Mortem sleuths will investigate a grisly beheading in a dark 1920s Paris

by Cindy Yans

Watching what you say at all times is absolutely essential to gaining consistent information. >>> It was lucky that you still had your stick-on goatee... or was it?



Differentiating itself from the old, classic, lighthearted adventure games is *Microids*' murder mystery *Post Mortem*, due in North America this Spring. It is more reminiscent of the old *Tex Murphy* games, the *Gabriel Knight* series, and especially *Black Dahlia*, with a pretty hefty slice of *Myst* thrown in just in case things become too easy. The game places you as detective-cum-artist Gus MacPherson in the center of 1920s Paris where you'll be convinced by the first pretty face to come along to continue your career as an investigator. The first pretty face happens to belong to Sophia Blake, a canned peach whose look and personality mimic the ones of other detective-sidekick-babe-type women. She converts you from artist back into private dick in no time with a story about the horrific murder of her sister and brother-in-law in a nearby hotel. As the player, you witnessed this mur-

der and beheading in a very graphic (albeit shadowy) opening cutscene. Solving this crime is your main focus throughout.

The game is extremely conversation driven, and what differentiates it from most others of its ilk is that your dialogue choices, offered in the usual list format, really do make a difference in how the plot will progress. Even what items end up in your inventory are susceptible to change, and you won't find yourself clicking exhaustively through all possible dialogue choices since the conversation trees are very steep and, depending on what you said, most of the time you won't see the same entries.

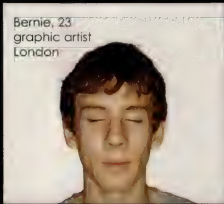
The bane of many story-loving adventurers has been the inclusion of puzzles that seem simply "plopped there" with no regard to how they really fit into the situation. You'll see at least some of that here, including *Myst*-like devices with wheels, gears, and levers serving as the barrier between two areas, and a "Magic Cube" alchemy puzzle. But don't worry, there's also a push-the-key-through-the-keyhole-dropping-it-onto-a-paper-that's-cleverly-placed-under-the-door-so-that-in-pulling-it-out-you-can-retrieve-the-necessary-key puzzle. Hopefully you'll find that solving the murder itself is mystery enough, and that the now-and-again "analyze the Hieronymus Bosch painting" activity isn't at all painful.

It's easy to expect a lot from *Microids* after its recent success with *Syberia*. If this game gets the polish it needs, and if there really is true replay value due to the divergent conversation system, Paris in the Spring will have never been so thrilling...and dark...and horrific. ●

IT'S A DOG EAT DOG WORLD OUT THERE, AND YOU'RE A HYENA WITH LOBSTER CLAWS. **NOW WHAT?**



Bernie, 23
graphic artist
London



Bandito: The claws. The fangs. Oh, the humanity. I wouldn't stop there though.

I'd also create a battalion of Scorpianhas for amphibious landings, and Bants (half bat-half ant) for the aerial assaults. What a pest...lol!

Tamidoll, who's your daddy?



Tami, 19
student
Boston



tamidoll1: A bib and a side of butter, please... The name of my campaign is:

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Out of Africa

Buying the farm in Somalia with *Black Hawk Down*

by Cindy Yans



Though delayed from its original late 2002 release date, NovaLogic's controversial tactical shooter is scheduled to appear in late February to deal its dose of Delta Force justice. In an early version of the game, the single-player missions offer a variety of tasks, from manning machine-guns on Hummers while running a gauntlet of bandits to riding a chopper into the heart of Mogadishu rounding up some prominent warlords.

The earlier multiplayer demo just didn't do justice to the game as it appears at this writing. The missions are varied, interesting,

and extremely good looking. Control is precise, sound is excellent, and the music is both exciting and evocative, sort of a cross between *The Last Temptation of Christ* soundtrack and *Age of Empires*, if you can believe that. You can also see lots of promise in the richness of its tactical combat. Beyond the basic run, gun, and blast gameplay, there's also a strong element of team leadership with a streamlined but effective system for issuing commands like door breaching and room clearing. It isn't *SWAT 3*, but it's a far cry from the simplistic lone ranger gameplay of earlier *Delta Force* games. Not only that, but the situation in Somalia is far different from that in any other shooter. There are numerous civilians, none of the bad guys wear uniforms,

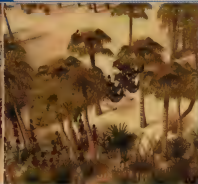
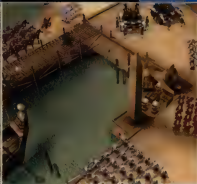
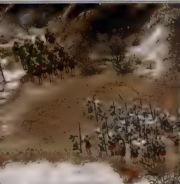
and you actually have to think before you shoot, otherwise "You Have Failed."

Gameplay seems smooth, and the Somali towns and cities are amazingly attractive renditions of ugly junkyard rubble. Every alley is a potential ambush spot, and the rooftops and balconies of the stucco and stone buildings make for some nasty vertical challenges as well. The countryside also looks good, and outside the river valleys it's reminiscent of *Battlefield 1942*, particularly when you're manning a .50 cal on a Hummer. It's always fun to blast things with a big gun, even though some moments are reminiscent of an old rail shooter.

One worry people have had about this game is that, given its subject matter and setting, it might wind up being a bit too realistic. Indeed, when all the bad guys are dark-skinned (actually, *all* the people you meet other than soldiers are black) and you spend a lot of time shooting them in various ways, the potential for some gamers to point toward racism seems all too real. That's not NovaLogic's fault, though, and the game takes a very professional and respectful approach to the UN mission in Somalia and the specific tasks of the US forces that fought there. This is a serious tactical shooter, on a par with *Ghost Recon*, at least in intent. That's a high bar to aim for, but it's good to see NovaLogic making the attempt. ●

[Counterclockwise from top] Scripted play with your teammates is reminiscent of *Medal of Honor*. >>> Some of the game's distant explosions are fantastic as your wish for a hit comes true. >>> I don't know about you, but it looks like free food to our friend with the gun.





Up in the Legion Air

In Praetorians, the battles come in large, super-sized, and mega-jumbo versions

by Cindy Yans



All of your troops are color coordinated.

Before Augustus Caesar formalized their station in 27BCE, members of the Praetorian Guard hung around polishing their shields and casually guarding their commander. Eventually, they were formally organized into cohorts of about 500 men each and became elite protectors of the emperor, and primary law enforcers in the cities of ancient Rome. This particular type of cohort is the central strength upon which Eidos and Pyro Studios base their real-time troop-based strategy game, *Praetorians*.

Most real-time games give you a sense of balance between resource gathering and management, and strategic defense and assault tactics. *Praetorians* leans heavily on the latter, so rather than spending your time sending woodcutters back and forth from tree to encampment, you'll spend most of your time planning the formation and disposal of your troops, and figuring out just how to penetrate enemy territory.

The game's single-player missions take place during the age of Julius Caesar, and include the Egyptians, Gauls, and Romans, each of which you can play during the up-to-eight person multi-player game. The gameplay is not quite just a deathmatch skirmish, even in skirmish mode, so of course you need to have at least some sense of resource management. It's just a different kind of management, with your troops as your primary resources, and additionally your (properly defended) cities pro-

ducing still more troops, your siege weapons, and finally defense structures and assault towers to fortify your cities and positions.

Since there are no "peasants," you use your base-level infantry troops as structure and weapon builders. If you have none available, you need to demote an existing batch of units so that they may build. You'll also need to promote existing units to produce the leaders who must occupy a city before you can control it. Careful control helps keep you from leaving costly "holes" in your army. Building and troop production seem rather slow in an early version of the game, and cities repopulate quite slowly as well. Troop movement speed varies, though, depending upon the type of unit.

But really, it's all about the large-scale battles (a la the *Total War* games), and that's where the fun begins. Troops are large blocks of units—all of one type—that you can unite, separate, or balance with other same-type units. You strategically group these cohorts and send them into battle, and you can hot-key specific groups to select them. Although many games purport that proper formation makes a difference in gameplay, here it's most certainly true, and troops will hold the specified formation religiously (unless they have pathing problems).

Pyro gave us the *Commandos* titles, so it's easy to become a bit uneasy about the game's potential difficulty, though the early version hints at fair balance. It's certainly graphically attractive, with flaming arrows and birds arising from the underbrush as forest-marauders flush them out. *Praetorians* will most likely be on shelves in March, so envision a general that looks like you marching to "Pretoria" someday soon. ●





The Paladin is battling on what appear to be creatures with masks designed by cast members of Beetlejuice.

Architecturally Speaking

Become a real estate maven in *Ultima Online*: Age of Shadows

by Suzanne Ashe

As far as fables go, *Ultima Online* has spawned its fair share both on and off line: from litigation woes of the early days (in 1997, players sued over lost characters and abilities when Origin updated the system), to dozens of real-life nuptials blossoming from the buds of cyber friendships, to last winter being named the 79th richest nation on Earth by *Wired* magazine. In the most ambitious commercial upgrade yet, citizens will now, in a whole new land, be able to build their own *Sims*-styled house using a custom-design feature, or choose to join the fray as one of two additional professions.

The changes are a result of user feedback, explains the game's producer Anthony Castoro who demonstrated how quick and easy it is for players to construct their own abode from a menu of clay bricks, stone, and forest wood.

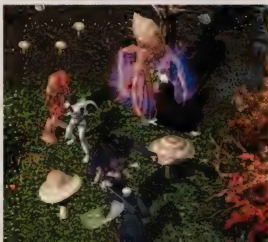
But say you've spent a lot of time constructing a new house and now need someone to dwell in it. In addition to Warrior, Magician, and Blacksmith (the career templates currently offered), you can join either side of the Karmic coin as either Paladin (holy warrior/curer of disease), or Necromancer (evil magician/spirit summoner).

All of these new components will unfold on a new continent named Malas. Although the origin of this new landmass is a "mystery," it looks an awful lot like the same well-trodden paths of yore. The continent is home to two cities: Luna (city of the Paladins) and Umbra (city of the Necromancers). Both cities reflect the values of the inhabitants; Umbra is a little darker and less organized than Luna, and grassy fields

surround both cities—for future development.

While *Age of Shadows* certainly isn't the newest and shiniest toy on the block, *Ultima* does have a loyal following. Provided it isn't completely poached by the likes of *EverQuest II* and *Star Wars Galaxies*, there are plenty of hunting, gathering and spell-casting years left in the future of *Ultima Online*. Look for it in late February. ●

Attack of the giant electric tree-squids? Or what?



Counter-Strike Offline

Condition Zero finds a new developer to deliver its single-player tactics

by Kevin Rice

Counter-Strike may perhaps be the most popular commercially distributed mod in existence. Despite its by today's standards low-end graphics, it still engages thousands of players at any given moment. But what about those that prefer a single-player experience? What if you have a poor Internet connection, or even worse, none whatsoever? Enter *Half-Life: Condition Zero*, due for release in Spring 2003, now from developer Ritual Entertainment.

After taking over from Gearbox Software, the game's third developer, Ritual seems to have done an impressive job. Though it doesn't provide any competition for the likes of *Doom III* or *Unreal Tournament 2003*, and it has no support for things like pixel shaders or other high-end video card features, *Condition Zero* still looks impressive.

"Many of the core *Counter-Strike* players aren't running with the latest hardware," says Tom Mustaine, the Lead Designer on the project. "While we've upped the polygon count of the models—both characters and weapons—around 66%, we don't want to alienate the existing group of hardcore players out there." In fact, the design relies on their old standbys, 3DSMax and Radiant, which helps explain the extremely fast development time.

The missions are not what you might expect, though.

Instead of an overall story where the character progresses from one level to the next, each level is like its own "mini-mission," completely disjointed from the previous one. "We believe this is what the current *Counter-Strike* players like,"

says Mustaine. "Currently, they log onto a server, play a few rounds, and then change maps for an entirely new scenario. That's what we're going for in *Condition Zero*." This means that each mission starts you off with new objectives and different weapons.

Some missions are full-on guns akimbo, some are more stealth oriented, and there are even a few escort missions for good measure.

This is, of course, single-player *Counter-Strike*, so they've revamped the AI with this in mind. Both your comrades and your enemies work more as teams than as single entities, and you can issue simple commands like "stay

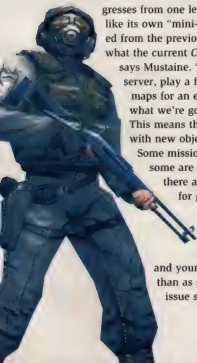


The man with one red mask. >>> (above) The security at the condominiums has really been upped.

here" or "attack that." Since you're going all over the world fighting those pesky terrorists (and no, you cannot play as a terrorist), the enemy-bots will speak in their native tongue.

Unless you're a polyglot, it's a good thing that the game contains subtitles for everything. "We thought it added to the authenticity of the situation," remarks Mustaine. "Since we're making what is essentially a realistic squad-based tactical shooter, it only made sense to recreate each location as accurately as possible, including the local language."

In addition to the entire single-player campaign, *Condition Zero* will feature 10 new multiplayer maps and 10 new single-player weapons. "You cannot take weapons from the single-player game and use them in a multiplayer game," explains Mustaine, "because that would upset the balance of what currently exists." •



For a time period that continues to fascinate Americans, the Civil War era has spawned surprisingly few mainstream movies. Beyond 1989's *Glory*, 1993's *Gettysburg*, and of course *Gone With the Wind*, Hollywood has pretty much ignored the bloodiest and most divisive war in our history. Then again, maybe that's why they've ignored it—it was bloody, divisive, and in its discussion of race and politics hits

very specifically with the movie," he notes, including missions based on First and Second Bull Run, Fredricksburg, and Chancellorsville. And according to Mitchell, an expansion pack including Antietam is also planned. The game uses LithTech's Jupiter engine, and while development began only about a year ago, Mitchell and Maxwell are confident it will give a good account of itself. You won't play specific characters from the movie, but rather you'll take on the role of a junior officer tasked with various missions, from blocking enemy



Prelude to Glory

Walk the road to Gettysburg with Gods and Generals

by Robert Hayer

too close to home for the mavens of escapism to wrap their heads around. That same reluctance to grapple with Mr. Lincoln's War has extended into computer games as well, where beyond a goodly number of hardcore wargames, the Civil War has hardly made an appearance.

There's change in the wind on both fronts for 2003, though. The pending release of *Gods and Generals* from Warner Brothers is going hand in hand with the release of AniVision's game of the same name, mating big-screen Civil War drama with small-screen 3D shooter action. Based on the Jeff Shaara book, the movie is the prequel to *Gettysburg*, which was based on Shaara's father Michael's *The Killer Angels*. Both are directed by Ron Maxwell, who has played an important role in encouraging the younger Shaara to continue his father's work. "The phenomenal response to *Gettysburg* rekindled my interest in a trilogy of Civil War novels and films," says Maxwell, who has been involved "from the get-go" with both the movie and the game, a first-person shooter set during the early years of the War Between the States.

Maxwell's introduction to PC gaming involved a big education curve. "I started out knowing next to nothing about games," he admits, though he proved a quick study, working closely with AniVision's lead designer Brian Mitchell. "The video game connects

Left to right: Director Robert Maxwell, Stephen Lang, Robert Duval, and Bruce Boxleitner. >>> Senator Phil Graham, Ron Maxwell, and Robert Duval. >>> Stephen Lang as Stonewall Jackson with Ron Maxwell. >>> [below] Die, campfire, die!



retreats to scouting to full-scale assaults. The trick is maintaining the "right balance of stealthy maneuvering and direct attacking," says Mitchell; even though you'll have access to relatively advanced mid-19th century weaponry like repeating rifles, you won't be a one-man army.

One reason Maxwell is particularly excited about the game is its first-person viewpoint, which he feels will convey the brutal intensity of Civil War battles. It will also, he hopes, entice a younger audience into the theaters to see the movie. "One of my primary reasons for getting involved in gaming is marketing," he says, pointing out that getting teens and young adults interested in the Civil War can



Jackson's aides with Anna Jackson and director.

sometimes be a challenge. He's hoping that once they've thrilled to charging the stone wall at Fredericksburg young gamers will flock to theaters to see the movie's take on the same event. The game itself should reflect a lot of what the movie offers, because development began after shooting was essentially complete, and Maxwell was able to funnel scenes, ideas, and inspiration to the AniVision designers. Mitchell describes his collaboration with Maxwell as "artistically and technologically worthwhile," and for his part Maxwell has been pleased with AniVision's efforts.

With plans to do games based on *Gettysburg* and the forthcoming final film in the trilogy, *The Last Full Measure*, Maxwell and AniVision are banking on the lasting appeal of Shaara's compassionate and human vision of Civil War combat. "The games are really Civil War related, not generically military," he says, and he wants them to remain that way—educating gamers about the realities of the war while still entertaining them. In that way, too, the games should, he hopes, parallel the movies. ●

Filming the 20th Maine charge at Marye's Heights.



WELCOME TO A LAND,





[left] This guy is on guard duty to keep people from playing with trash. >>> [below] The developer says there is a lot of interaction for a shooter, both with the environment itself and objects.

Breaking Bottles in the Hall

Digitalo Studios brings the physics of vandalism to their first person shooter *Devastation*

by Tom Chick

Vic DeLeon takes a shotgun to some guy and blows his leg off. Then he picks up the leg and uses it as a club to beat on another guy. "I don't know why we did that," says DeLeon, the designer of Digitalo Studios' *Devastation*, one of the many upcoming first-person shooters built from the *Unreal* engine. "Shark bait? I don't know, but we did it and it was free."

By free, he means it was something *Devastation* could do easily. In addition to creating its own proprietary effects systems for smoke, fire, water, and shadows, Digitalo has also made its own physics system. "We're running full physics simulation on a good majority of all the decorations in our world." He whacks another guy's head off with the severed leg and now he's kicking the head down the street. He picks up traffic cones and tosses them onto roofs. He knocks over barrels. He shoots a pipe so that water pours out through the bullet hole. He smashes a soda machines to show how cokes cans come flying out like coins from a slot machine. Then he picks up the cans and throws them through windows. He's a rampant miscreant, breaking stuff and kicking it around just because he can.

"Take garbage in the streets," he says. "There's a lot of garbage. Boxes, crates, containers, you name it. You can interact with everything." He kicks trash around when he moves

the icing on their gameplay cake.

The gameplay cake is an emphasis on dynamic gunfights rather than linear corridor crawls. Whereas most first person shooters walk you through a level seeded with bad guys dutifully standing around waiting to get shot, *Devastation* hopes to achieve a more dynamic back-and-forth struggle for territory. Once the obligatory exposition/tutorial missions are out of the way, the later levels are supposed to play like base battles in which the player is accompanied by a team of bots. Both sides have a doo-dad called a spawner (the cyberpunk backstory actually revolves around these devices) that





[above] >>> These guys are protecting that tire; it's a seriously important tire. [below] As you can tell by the writing on the wall, this level is set in Taiwan.

time you play a level, it can play out differently, with gunfights in different places. You can have your NPCs start a gunfight to occupy the enemy and go around a back way to the enemy base. You could even hang back and send your teammates to attack. Eventually, they just might clear the level for you.

DeLeon tentatively mentions *System Shock* and *Deus Ex* as inspirations for *Devastation*. Although there are also minor dalliances with stealth ("We don't ever force stealth, but we do encourage it") and computer hacking (essentially a substitute for key hunting), *Devastation* is primarily about the gunplay. "I guess it's really more like *Half-Life* meets *Max Payne*. At least, that's what we're trying to shoot for," he says, picking up a mop bucket and flinging it down a hallway just because he can. ♦



WHERE STEEL...





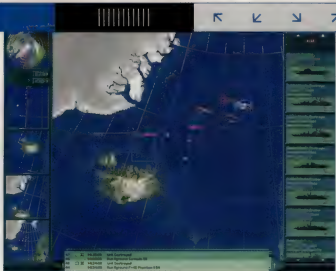
Wargame Ahoy!

After a tortured development, Harpoon 4 is still sailing toward release

by Bruce Geryk

The long and tortured history of *Harpoon 4* would bring tears to the eyes of the most hardened naval veteran. Originally slated for a 2000 release, it got caught in the merry-go-round of acquisitions that began when Mindscape, owner of original publisher SSI, was bought by The Learning Company. As SSI passed into the hands of Mattel and then UbiSoft, priorities were changed, and the development of games like *Silent Hunter II* and *Destroyer Command* (both done by *Harpoon 4* developer Ultimatum) pushed the game further and further behind schedule. It was even briefly cancelled in March of 2001, and then resurrected a month later. Now, three years past its original target date, it's still chugging along and scheduled for release in March of 2003, and looking at an early version of the game gives a reasonably clear indication of what this next iteration of the venerable series is going to look like.

The original *Harpoon* made its name as a set of naval miniatures rules designed by Larry Bond, co-author with Tom Clancy of *The Hunt for Red October*, and a former naval officer. When it first appeared in computer form in 1989, its use of real-time plotting and resolution, along with inset combat animations, was innovative. Today, many games have adopted aspects of *Harpoon*'s approach, but the game's designers have seen no need to make a reciprocal move to incorporate more recent gaming conventions. Despite the passage of time, the game's lineage is almost instantly recognizable. It's still the modern naval warfare simulation par



excellence, favoring a military-style situation board presentation that remains largely unchanged from over a decade ago. The map is still a flat display of the Barents Sea, North Atlantic, and surrounding waters, and the conflict is still very much centered on an East-vs.-West clash, whether it be hypothetical battles between Cold War combatants, or a modernized version involving a Russian civil war. There is a long and detailed campaign, written by Larry Bond himself, which re-fights the classic Soviet Red Banner Northern Fleet sortie into the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap.

The game has implemented, for the first time, a 3D battle environment

to replace the old 2D animations used when units came under attack. This does a lot to enhance the feeling of immersion but doesn't actually affect gameplay very much. An earlier design concept seemed to suggest that the 3D view would play a role in short-range combat operations, but this seems to have been shelved in favor of a more straightforward approach.

Because so much can be happening in the game at once, you can assign various map areas to thumbnails and rotate them through your main screen view as necessary. This is an elegant solution to the old problem of having multiple windows open, and with the ability to access most unit controls by simply right-clicking the unit in question to bring up a pop-up menu, the game flows smoothly. With so much detail built into the game, a major task for a new title in this series is to make a truly transparent



[above] The 3D animations really increase the tension and the damage animations bring the payoff. >>> [top left] You can watch your carriers launch planes in 3D now. >>> [Stop right] Iceland takes it on the chin once more.

interface that can let the game's strategic depth shine through.

The game's implementation of multiplayer will be a first for the series. While it is now rather less ambitious than originally planned, this feature will still allow to players to compete against one another, and even allow for dedicated servers rather than just having one of the players act as host.

With almost any game that has been in development this long, there is the danger that technology and tastes will have left it behind by the time it ships. This series is less susceptible to these issues than most games, because it's really what's under the hood that counts. With so much time having passed since the last game, *Harpoon 4* has the opportunity to hook a whole new group of naval enthusiasts. ●

I Need My Space!

Galactic Civilizations rises from the OS/2 grave

by Robert Hayer

In 1994, the days of IBM's ill-fated OS/2, Brad Wardell turned out *Galactic Civilizations*, and the turn-based space strategy game became one of the few hit games for that star-crossed platform. Fans of thoughtful space strategy, though, hoped that Wardell and his Stardock Systems would one day create a Windows version of the game for the masses. Almost ten years later, that dream is coming true. The new *Galactic Civilizations*, published by Strategy First for Windows, picks up on the original game's themes of sophisticated, non-cheating AI and extreme configurability and refines everything to a nice 21st-Century sheen. The look is clean, presenting a lot of data in an attractive and well-organized fashion. The depth is impressive, with five major races, extensive diplomacy, trade, and planetary management options. And variety is astounding; you can customize virtually anything, from the characteristics of your galactic civilization to the specific advantages and disadvantages of your opponents.

In the tradition of games like *Master of Orion*, Wardell's effort builds on a familiar paradigm. You start with one system, one scout ship, and a colony vessel. Your goal is galactic domination, by force, trade, or diplomacy. Galaxies range from tiny to huge, and depending on how you set your opponents you can expect a game of peaceful coexistence, with the outcome riding on the United Planets' meetings, or a struggle for survival, with planetary invasions setting scores. Usually you'll get a mixture of both,

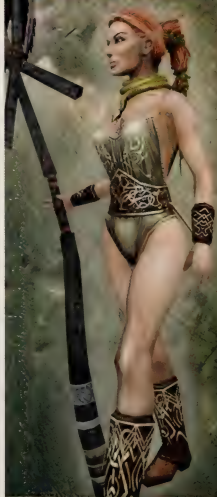


Play against homicidal maniacs or Carebears; it's up to you.

though combat is still satisfying if abstract. What makes *Galactic Civilizations* different is the depth to all of the non-combat options. Each empire has a dominant political system and different political factions. Ethics and morality play roles, and decisions you make during the game will determine how the rest of the galaxy perceives your empire, and how your own people respond.

Though it's a solo game, you will also be able to upload your scores and strategies to the game's website, where other gamers will ultimately be able to play against a virtual you, and where you can earn fame by posting the best record against the computer opponents. It's an attractive package for strategy gamers, one with little unnecessary fluff and a whole lot of substance that should make this winter a little warmer for space buffs. •

IS POLISHED WITH BLOOD.



COMING SOON TO PC.



PC
CD-ROM
SOFTWARE



MATURE
M
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

BLOOD
VIOLENCE

BLACK
LABEL
GAMES
VIVENDI
UNIVERSAL
GAMES

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[Top to bottom] Stepping out of the implant terminal like a wannabe Johnny Mnemonic. >>> Good work, prisoner. Now, give me jumping jacks. >>> We'll take one of those, and one of those, and...

Murder, Inc.

Killing is PlanetSide's business, and business is good

by Scott Steinberg

Sony Online wants you to die. Horribly. And many times over. Shot by snipers, crushed by a Lightning tank, riddled with bullets from an automatic turret—they're not particular. To the creators of *PlanetSide*, it's all fun and games until someone gets hurt. Then it becomes big business. "Every company since the inception of *Quake* has wanted to simulate a full blown war," says producer Dave Georgeson, whose past credits include *Tribes 2*. "It's a big challenge—

to understand the logic once you begin playing, and realize that although this is a team-based title with clearly defined roles put forth, those roles are continually shifting.

After creating an avatar, you can spend Certification Points—replenished throughout play as you gain levels and advance in rank—to acquire certain skills. These attributes, when unlocked, allow immediate access to new equipment and vehicles. But, provided you frequently access terminals during play, such talents can quickly be swapped.

Not only can you quickly shift from a heavy EXO rig (the abilities of which include increased inventory space and built-in armaments) to a much lighter and more practical infiltration suit (which confers partial invisibility) on the fly, but you can exchange character kits dynamically as well. For frontline maneuverability, outfit yourself as a foot soldier. Favor anti-vehicular capabilities, and all you've to do is grab the requisite hardware. Don't forget that you'll need medics to heal wounded soldiers, combat engineers for setting motion sensor traps, and hackers that are essential to seizing control of facilities—one of the main gameplay mechanics.

You can flop around implants as well. Mapped to hotkeys, these special abilities, ranging from a personal shield to audio amplification, function as temporary skill boosters. Powerful, yet fleeting, you'll want to invoke them sparingly, as they

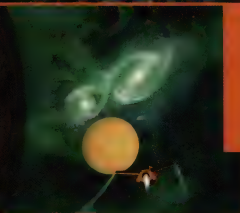
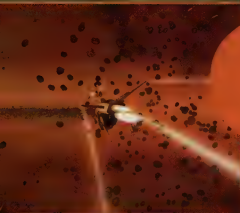
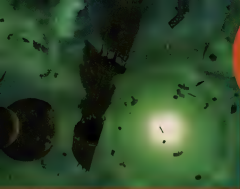


exactly the reason we wanted to tackle it here."

That's a fairly accurate summation of just what the company's done, as this is one of the first grand-scale first-person shooter to incorporate support for literally thousands of players. Set in a persistent state online world, battle wages 24/7 for control of a rogue planet. Three races—the Terran Republic, New Conglomerate, and Vanu Empire—stand opposed. Each blessed with unique abilities, units, and equipment, all can nonetheless steal their rivals' technology by pursuing the same actions necessary to achieve their main objective—annihilating any who stand in their way.

Easier said than done, says Georgeson. "*PlanetSide* is completely different than the normal online game. Your goals are constantly changing." Indeed, it's easy





Fremont's living universe includes debris fields, asteroid clouds, and some strange phenomena.





*Their six-year mission: to make a new game in an old genre. Digital Anvil's **FREELANCER** finally gets ready to launch*

by Tom Chick

Alien organisms aren't just expensive, they're highly perishable. As soon as you leave the station, they start dying, one at a time. It's not the sort of cargo you want to carry around while hunting for a buyer. But you've got a tip that they're used for research on Junyo, an ocean moon in orbit around the gas giant Seto. You passed the distinctive blue/orange planet combo on your way here, bringing luxury consumer goods from Manhattan to New Tokyo.

So you check your balance—just over 25,000 credits, which will get you 22 organisms at 1100 each—and plot the trip. It's a short route down a few trade lanes and then through the jump gate to the next system. You'll be there in no time. You load up and head out, checking the status of the organisms as you go. Hang in there, little guys.

But just past the Dhashi Border Station, the trade lane has been broken by six Hawk fighters from the Golden Chrysanthemum terrorist organization. Not these guys again. They used to ignore you, but ever since you took a few missions from the Kusari Naval Forces to make some extra money, you've had GC ships gunning for you. Unfortunately, you can't spare the time to play. You try to charge your cruise engines to dash away, but they hit you with disruptor missiles. The trade lane ring should be restored in just a few seconds, so you burn a few shield batteries to keep from taking damage as they plink away at you with their guns. Once the trade lane is back up, you jump in and dart away. What good are the bounty hunters at Dhashi if those terrorist punks can jump a trade lane so close to their patrols?

Now the blue and orange globes are visible as you hurtle through the trade lane's rings. From a distance, it's clear that Seto, the gas giant, dwarfs its ocean moon Junyo. But by the time you drop out of the trade lane at the edge of Junyo's blue atmosphere, it's as big as the sky and Seto is barely a sliver peering over its edge. You request clearance from the docking ring to the moon's surface and are told to stand by. "You will be cleared as soon as pattern is free," the traffic controller tells you.

It's a stupid Samsura freighter. You've got decaying alien organisms in your cargo bay and he gets in line ahead of you carrying—you pull up a quick cargo scan—water. Lovely. Water on an ocean planet gets precedence over rapidly dying valuable alien organisms. By the time you land, you've lost another one. The eighteen survivors each sell for 1300 credits, which nets you a profit of 3600 credits. Minus the 4400 cost for the four alien organisms who died in transit. Great. You just paid 800 credits to fly from New Tokyo to Junyo.

Maybe it's time to figure out how to move some of those illegal alien artifacts you found at Kageshima Station, a Farmer's Alliance stronghold off the beaten path in the Hayate Dust Field? They pay good money for those in Liberty, if you can avoid routine scans by the naval and police patrols. And they're not perishable.



This is what it's like to play *Freelancer*. With this sort of on-the-fly, do-it-yourself narrative, it breaks out of the space game groove that Digital Anvil founder Chris Roberts laid out in 1990 with *Wing Commander*: fly to point A, kill these enemies, fly to point B, kill these enemies, return to base, then play the next mission.

Only 85 Dog Years Old

But *Freelancer* has been a long time coming. Conceived six years ago, it was built around DirectX 3.0. The hardware accelerator revolution was just getting underway. Since then, it's been a perennial vaporware joke at each year's Electronic Entertainment Expo, the industry's yearly trade show. "As a development house, we made a lot of rookie mistakes," says Phil Wattenbarger, the game's producer. "I mean, we were trying to make five or six games at the same time, all in different genres, and *Freelancer* was just one of them."

Two years ago, Microsoft acquired Digital Anvil and there was a flurry of activity. Roberts left, and all but two of the company's projects were either cancelled or sold off. Jorg Neumann, who took over as the lead designer of *Freelancer*, was helming one of the cancelled games, *Loose Cannon*. Although his disappointment is obvious, he also has a sense that it was a necessary winnowing. "Microsoft was very patient with us," he says, "But we had bitten off more than we could chew."

So here it is, six years later, and Digital

Anvil is finally finishing the game that tries to twist *Wing Commander's* genre from a canned experience to an accessible addictive way of making your own stories. They call *Freelancer* a "living universe," a vivid place in which a lot of dynamic stuff happens while you're running around doing your own thing.

Cheating at Astronomy

The galaxy according to *Freelancer* isn't a big open vacuum. In fact, it cheats its astronomy so egregiously that if you listen closely, you can hear Kepler spinning in his grave. By fudging the scale and essentially removing the z-axis, the setting feels more like a continent than a galaxy. The basic building blocks are systems, which are basically huge square arenas with a sun in the center. Systems can contain planets, space stations, shipyards, storage depots, nebulae, asteroid belts, debris fields, and other features. Trade lanes, which are composed of a series of floating rings that accelerate ships to five times their normal speed, serve as space highways built between important points. A map screen lets you plot waypoints, but planets are big enough to serve as landmarks if you'd rather eyeball your way around. In the distance, you can even see features from other systems that let you orient yourself. For instance, from most systems, there's a long gray asteroid belt, dubbed the Great Barrier Reef, visible to the "west" and a great yellow nebula below Rheinland visible to the "south."

"We wanted you to feel like it was a real place, where you always know you're coming from here and going to there, says Neumann. "We wanted you to be able to

Ships come in three sizes: light fighters, heavy fighters (which are essentially bombers), and freighters.

visualize that. But the problem is that space is big. We had to channel the experience a bit. Trade lanes were important for this. The idea is that there's this big forest and they're like a road through the forest. Now if you're sitting next to the road, you can jump convoys and attack them. And since there are probably police and military patrols along those trade lanes, there's a good chance that as you're attacking, they're going to get help. Then you can run into the forest, which could be an asteroid field or a nebula, to lose them. It's a cops and robbers kind of thing. It's almost like *Grand Theft Auto* in a way, where you do something bad and you're running to get away."

Win the Police and Influence Pirates

The relationships that create this cops and robbers dynamic are another key element of the living universe. Systems are populated with ships, all going somewhere, all doing something specific, and all members of a faction. As you rack up kills, factions begin to develop an opinion about you. Eventually, one might hate you so much that its ships will attack you on sight, or another might be so friendly towards you that its ships will come to your aid in a fight. If a faction really likes you, it might offer you lucrative missions, unique guns or ships, or exclusive information.

But the faction system isn't just a set of axes on which the universe can revolve around the player. It also determines how ships react to each other. You'll come across battles that have nothing to do with you. Jump in if you want to curry favor

Space stations are built from a tinker-toy modular design system.

with a faction or just grab some spare loot. Ships are very vocal about what they're doing. You can listen in on radio chatter or you can hail any ship to find out where it originated, where it's going, why it's going there, and what cargo it's hauling. Like truckers with CB radios, Freelancer's pilots tend to be very talkative. Over a busy planet or trade lane intersection, Freelancer can sound like an air traffic control sim.

The Universe is Your Oyster

One of the most important elements of this living universe is the way you're set loose in it to do as you please. Profitable pirating will be difficult until you can take on the authorities. Trade can be a matter of trail and error. Taking missions for cash rewards is an immediate way to advance the game and move through the universe. There's a planet-hopping effect as you jump around from mission to mission, toting commodities to sell as you go, moving forward to explore new systems and see what new toys are available on the other side of each jump gate.

"It's a lot like *EverQuest*," Neumann says, while Wattenbarger calls it a massively multiplayer online role-playing game that's not massive and not necessarily even multiplayer. You can set up a server as your own personal single player playground or as a place for people to play online. Character info is maintained on the server, so you'll want to find a consistent place to play.

"We have a theoretical top end of 32



Slumping Space

Why is the space sim genre in decline? A few of the people that make them offer some possibilities:

PAUL ANVIL

Digital Anvil founder and creator of the *Wing Commander* series

People get bored without new experiences. When I look at the space combat games in recent years I really don't see that much different from *Wing Commander* and Larry Holland's *X-Wing*. They have been a little slicker and updated with nicer graphics, but at the end of the day the play experience was



the same as you could get ten years ago. The games business is built on innovation and new experiences, as is witnessed by the rise of the first person shooter genre and imassively-multiplayer gamel experience in recent years. I just feel like some of the old staples like flight sims, adventure games, and space combat games have gotten stale and players have turned to newer and fresher experiences.

BOB WATTENBARGER

Designer of *Vollition's Freespace* series

That's the big question isn't it? It's still one we kick around here at Vollition regularly, without any definitive answer. I think it's partly the same reason PC games in general are in a slump. Consoles had really taken off, and with those came a focus on a different type of game; one that's quicker to

learn, faster to reward, and with fewer controls to master. Since space sims of the time were usually grand, epic productions with many keyboard bindings and a longer learning curve, they were just running against the flow of the new gaming trends.

Before its release, I thought *(Star Wars) Episode I* might reinvigorate interest in space combat. Unfortunately, for space sim fans, little Anakin klutzing around in a stolen ship wasn't nearly enough.



DAVID BERRY

Creator of the *Battlecruiser* series

It's not that the genre is in a slump, it's that the bar was raised for what is considered a hit in terms of sales. As such, space sims became a niche, seemingly overnight, joining the ranks of flight sims, war games, etc. Back when selling 25,000 units of any game was enough to warrant screams of glee, anything short of 100,000 is frowned upon by the big guys. So, while small companies can coast along just fine on sales of 50,000, the publishers who fund (or used to fund) these titles just don't find them profitable.



MICHAEL POWELL

Co-founder of *Particle Systems* and co-creator of the *Independence War* series

I would say several reasons. One, space is not fashionable

players before it gets to be too much for the processor," Studio Manager Alan Hartman says. "But even though you only have that many people playing concurrently in the universe, you can have hundreds or thousands of accounts of people who are coming in and playing at different times. It really can be a large community even if they're not playing at the same time."

"It's really best for group of friends hooking up at regular times, taking missions together, hunting out the surprises, finding rumors," says Neumann. "You can go places where otherwise you would have a tough time surviving. It's really cooperative. Someone gets a missions then the reward is split up evenly."

"Everything else is up to the players," says Wattenbarger, "We allow them to group and we allow them to loot and trade. How they're going to behave from there is up to them."

"It's just like *Diablo*," says Neumann, "If a guy has a bunch of gold, you're like 'hey, I need money' and he's like 'okay, I'm going to send you some'. Or not. There may be that one guy who's always grabbing stuff."

Neumann points out that after you destroy a ship, the B key will automatically beam its loot into your cargo bay. Later, when they're all taking the latest build for a multiplayer spin, Neumann asks, rhetorically, "Where's everybody's finger?" They're all busy slapping the B key as soon as an enemy ship blows up.

There's also a single player game in which a storyline occasionally insinuates itself into whatever you're doing by dropping scripted missions in front of you. The subject matter starts out very post-*X-Files/Deus Ex*, with stuff about government conspiracies segueing into an alien invasion theme. There are cutscenes with voiceovers by Beverly Hills 90210's Ian Ziering as the protagonist, Xander Berkeley as the leader of a mysterious cult, and George Takei as a Kusari lord. Also listen for an appearance by John Rhys-Davies. "We got Gimli!" Neumann beams.

To keep players from getting too powerful for the storyline's missions, the single-player game limits the class of weaponry you can buy based on how many missions you've finished. Once you finish the final mission, you'll unlock a powerful new type

of ship, which you can use to continue playing, trading, upgrading, and exploring. Neumann estimates a player will reach level 20 once finishing the storyline. The level cap is 40.

You Will Believe a Mouse Can Fly

Freelancer does not support joysticks. You fly your ship with a mouse or not at all, moving a cursor on the screen to aim your guns, which are mounted on swivels rather than fixed forward. You also lead your ship with the cursor, turning it more sharply the further you move it towards the edge of the screen. The WASD keys control speed and strafing. It's a new and different way to move through space, but it quickly becomes second nature. You don't get the feeling that you're directly moving the ship so much as continually designating the place it's supposed to go.

Neumann insists this shouldn't alienate traditional simmers. "The dynamics of joystick flight is not what we tried to change

You can knock pieces off damaged ships and even set them on fire.

There is nothing happening to catch the public's imagination. Two, graphics technology in the early days meant that 3D was restricted to simulator type titles. The amazing advances over the last four or five years in graphics hardware mean that we can now do realistic human characters. So much more is now possible.

Three, mass market means consoles. Space sims are very difficult to do well on consoles.

What is the future of the genre?

ROBERTS

Hopefully *Freelancer*! Seriously, when we started out designing *Freelancer* in 1997, the goal was to shake the genre up and update it with a different play style and experience that would be closer in action to the first-person shooter genre, hence the mouse based interface, and more accessible to the main gaming audience, like *Diablo* did for role-playing games. We wanted to make a world so immersive that once you were in, it wouldn't let you go. (3DO's) Trip Hawkins once said a game should be simple (as in easy to understand and play), hot (look and sound great so you want to play it), and deep (you keep learning and discovering things as you play). These were the goals of the design team on *Freelancer* and if we've delivered this in the eyes of the game playing audience, then I think the genre has a chance of seeing some life.

PLEYCHER

I think in order for space sims to boom again, it will be in another form: on consoles. Someday someone will make a space combat game, and it will be met with surprising suc-

cess. A few others will copy it, a few more will do some original stuff, and we'll have a new trend. I doubt it will ever be exactly like it was for PC gamers, though. Space sims on the PC will need to focus on elements that only work well on the PC. Massively multiplayer games that require keyboards are a good example. Console keyboards aren't something console gamers want to deal with yet. Myself included.

SMART

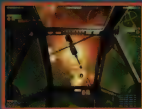
I don't think it's going to get any better. The best one can hope for is to ensure that whatever fans are left in a series continue to support the title and that the developers remain true to the designs and goals that kept the fans around in the first place. Lose that and you might as well pack up and go home.

At the moment, there are niche offerings such as my own *Battlecruiser* series, *X: Jumpgate*, and *Darkspace*, all being developed and sold by their developers. The reason being that it's harder to have a publisher pick up a space sim, or any niche title for that matter. In the current industry climate, if there is no history of good sales, you stand an even lower chance of getting a space sim published. The best you can do is to sell directly or just have someone sell boxes for you and hope that the fanbase is still there to keep supporting the game.

I have no hope that space sims will get out of this slump for the aforementioned reasons. In fact, wait until *Freelancer* is released and see what happens.

POWELL

I think the only way forward is serving the niche market with massively multiplayer products. If a massively multiplayer space sim can command 50,000 subscribers it would be viable. But 50,000 sales for a boxed title is just a way of losing money fast.





here. What we tried to change is how a game works when most people don't have a joystick. There's no loss of control with the mouse. It adds is total freedom of where you're shooting. In the old games, you had to perfectly align your ship and it was very confining. In our game, you fly by a battleship and you can still fire off to the side."

Neumann explains that there's ultimately a lot of depth and simplicity to their control scheme. "Freelancer is fully playable just with the mouse. Right now we're asking the testing people to take their left hand off the keyboard and just fly with the mouse. It's still perfectly playable. But when you get better, you can start using strafe and you can use Q and E for missiles and mines, and C for countermeasures. Then there's another level with killing your engine and drifting around. There's circle strafing or hitting reverse thrust and having guys overshoot so you're directly behind them. There are lots and lots of tactics and I think that's what makes it so successful. It's like *Diablo*. 'Click. Oh, look, he walks.' But there's so much more to be found in how it works. The really successful games allow for this kind of skill increase in the control abilities of the player, like in *Tony Hawk* for example."

Telling Stories

"I remember starting out one game," recalls Wattenbarger, "The area was pretty heavily patrolled by police, so I figured it was safe. I wanted to advance quickly, so I sold everything, all my equipment, all my weapons..."

"Your shield," says Neumann.

"My shield," Wattenbarger says. "I had

no shield. I figured the police were there, they're going to help me out. So I had a hull full of Mox fuel and I actually made it. I made a couple of runs and upgraded."

"That's definitely living on the edge," Neumann says. "It's not recommended but it worked out that time."

"We were totally laughing at him," Hartman says. "You can take like, one hit, dude. You have no shield. Don't even run into a rock or you'll die."

They're on a roll now. Hartman chimes in again. "The one I had fun with was where we got together and had I think eight, maybe ten people. We all bought freighters, we all put turrets on them, and we designated one guy as the lead guy and the rest of us joined formation on him. So he was leading us into battles for these missions we'd taken and we're all in formation, in turret view. We don't have to worry about steering as the lead guy is driving and our ships just follow him. It was great. These enemies were coming through us and they're like...pkowwww..." He flies his hand down and makes an explosion noise. "It was like a B-17 thing," he laughs.

Earlier versions of *Freelancer* had a button that you pressed to automatically trail another ship. You targeted an enemy, hit the trail button, and then fired your weapons as the computer flew for you.

"One of the most significant decisions we made was getting rid of that trail button," Wattenbarger says. "We felt like the player wasn't making enough decisions. You weren't able to learn and gain skills in combat. We asked, 'So what kind of story do you tell about when you're in combat?' Everybody's story was 'click on enemy and

trail.' But now it's like everybody has their own tactics and their own stories."

"He likes to get in these asteroid fields and hide behind rocks," Neumann says. As they're playing a multiplayer game, everyone finally turns against Wattenbarger for getting too greedy with the loot. He shows he has a few tricks up his sleeve. After ambushing some of his colleagues, they team up on him and severely damage his ship. He ducks into a trade lane and they give chase, hurtling along at high speed behind him. Suddenly he's not ahead of them anymore. They reach the end of the trade lane and Wattenbarger's battered ship is nowhere to be seen.

"Did we kill him?" someone asks. "I think he ejected or something." It turns out Wattenbarger simply hit the escape key to drop out of the trade lane. His pursuers were moving so quickly through the lanes that they hurtled past him. He limps into a station to repair and stock up on shield batteries and nanobots.

"They're like mana and health potions," Wattenbarger explains. "You have shields, which regenerate over time, and your hull, which you have to repair at a base. But you can also carry a certain number of shield batteries and nanobots to instantly repair them. They're even blue and red. Just like *Diablo*." And much like potions dropped by monsters, you'll often be able to loot these from an enemy after you've killed him. Wattenbarger stocks up on goodies and launches back into space, only to find everyone waiting for him outside the space station.

"Aren't you glad you have a shield now?" Neumann asks him. ●

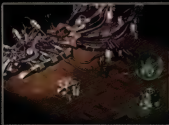
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BEST OF THE YEAR

2002

12TH ANNUAL
COMPUTER
GAMES AWARD



GAME
OF THE
YEAR
2002



As noted gamer Charles "Vic70rlan" Dickens said in a slightly different era, and in a slightly different context, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." We once again find the industry at a crossroads, as the current generation of console systems risks marginalizing and overshadowing the PC. Despite the doom-and-gloom, some of it warranted, some of it overblown, it was a stellar year for quality gaming, as evidenced by our picks for the year's 10 best games. In past years, we chose awards based on genre, but for 2002 we've acknowledged the irrelevance of those types of categories and ditched that approach. This frees us to reward the true "best" games, rather than omit some solely because they're in a competitive genre.

So take a look-see at how good—and bad—it was in 2002, as voted by the editors and contributors to this magazine.

BATTLEFIELD 1942

DEVELOPER DIGITAL ILLUSIONS CE

PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS

NO ONE LIVES FOREVER 2: A SPY IN H.A.R.M.'S WAY

DEVELOPER MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS

PUBLISHER FOX INTERACTIVE/VIVENDI UNIVERSAL

Trying to get a few dozen hardcore gamers to agree on anything is generally futile, but our writers and editors agreed that two games stood head and shoulders above everything else released this year, tying in our voting. Curiously enough, you'd be hard-pressed to find two games that are more dissimilar. One is a WWII online action game that provides, by far, the year's best multiplayer experience. The other is a 60s spy game that provides, by far, the year's best single-player experience. Put them both together and you have... well, a seriously weird game.

While *Battlefield 1942* came out of nowhere, *No One Lives Forever 2* is the *Godfather II* of game sequels, and it further cements Monolith's spot at the top of the 3D gaming world. It takes the original game's setting and polishes everything, refining the gameplay while maintaining all that was good about its award-winning predecessor.

Battlefield 1942, on the other hand, is a near-perfect balance between fun and realism, and simple gameplay mechanics with complex permutations. The setting makes everything familiar, and its exaggerated "virtual battlefield" is incredible. The continuity of controls, even with disparate modes of travel (from soldiers to planes), and the best conceived sets of goals since *Counter-Strike* make it the year's premiere way to blow up your friends and enemies.

10
BEST
GAMES



10 BEST GAMES



2

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS DEVELOPER BIOWARE PUBLISHER INFOGRAMES

This is the most game in a box, potential and actual, since *Half-Life*. While its single-player game is merely passable, its toolset is accessible enough for dabblers and powerful enough for hardcore mod makers. The sheer amount of user-created content available is astounding. This is what computer role-playing games should have been all along...

3

THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND

DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER BETHESDA SOFTWARES

... and this is what single-player computer role-playing games can be. *Morrowind* is a dizzying tour-de-force of design, detail, and depth. It hearkens back to a time when role-playing games were deep and thoughtful odysseys, but it also reaches forward with cutting-edge technology and open-ended gameplay. Unlike its ambitious but ultimately flawed predecessors, this is Herculean role-playing that works.

4

AGE OF MYTHOLOGY DEVELOPER ENSEMBLE STUDIOS

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT

The formerly stoic creators of the *Age of Empires* series take the dive into 3D with stunning results. This is an amazingly well-balanced game, both in terms of its pacing and its mix of standard historical and fantastical units, which comes as no surprise to fans of their previous games. But the mix of the serious and the whimsical showed that Ensemble is now a real-time strategy party girl.

5

WARLORDS BATTLECRY 2 DEVELOPER STRATEGIC STUDIES GROUP

PUBLISHER UBISOFT

One of the grandfathers of turn-based strategy creates one of the definitive real-time strategy games. A big game with a long learning curve, it has one of the most streamlined and flexible interfaces in its genre and a dynamic single-player campaign. But what's most remarkable about it is that manages to take elements of some of the best games out there—*Total Annihilation*, *StarCraft*—and create something that works better than most of its influences.

BEST HARD WARE

RADEON 9700 PRO MANUFACTURER ATI Slightly dodgy (but steadily improving) drivers weren't enough to keep ATI's latest and greatest video card from being the most impressive gaming hardware of the year. With performance that left NVIDIA's best in the dust, and full DirectX 9 features months before DirectX 9 was even released, the 9700 Pro represents a total reversal of fortune in the 3D graphics war.



Best Pay-to-Play Game **DARK AGE OF CAMELOT** • Best Art Direction **SYBERIA** • Best Technology **NEVERWINTER NIGHTS** • Best Music **NO ONE LIVES FOREVER 2** • Best Soundtrack **GRAND THEFT AUTO III** • Best Sound Effects **MEDAL OF HONOR: ALLIED ASSAULT** • Best Writing **NO ONE LIVES FOREVER 2** • Best AI **NO ONE LIVES FOREVER 2** • Best Multiplayer **BATTLEFIELD 1942** • Best Budget Game **MOONBASE COMMANDER** • Best Interface **WARLORDS BATTLECRY 2** • Best Voice Acting **FREEDOM FORCE** • Best Independent Game **COMBAT MISSION: FROM BARBAROSSA TO BERLIN** • Best Mod **DAY OF DEFEAT 3.0**

CONTRACT, NOT EXPAND (Tie) **Medal of Honor: Spearhead** • **Aliens Versus Predator 2: Primal Hunt** • **BEST USE OF YOUR TAX DOLLARS** **America's Army: Operations** • **BEST GAME FOR EXACTLY ONE WEEK** **Dungeon Siege** • **SPECIAL AWARD FOR PLAYABILITY** **Progress Quest** • **BEST GAME IF YOU START EVERY SENTENCE WITH, "DUDE..."** **Unreal Tournament 2003** • **SHOULD BE A PORN GAME** **Hard Truck: 18 Wheels of Steel** • **REDUNDANT REDUNDANCY** **Divine Divinity** • **BEST GAME TO NAME YOUR DAUGHTER** **Hegemonia**

6
7
8
9
10**GRAND THEFT AUTO III** DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER ROCKSTAR GAMES

Last year's biggest console game is equally stunning in its PC incarnation. While all of the focus is on its various unsavory elements—carjacking, psychotic rampages, beating up the elderly with baseball bats—it's the open-ended “do whatever you feel like doing” gameplay that makes it so compelling.

TIGER WOODS 2003 DEVELOPER HEADGATE STUDIOS

PUBLISHER EA SPORTS

This game makes you cry, cuss, and shout. While that's normally a bad thing, it's perfect for a simulation of the world's most frustrating sport. Featuring the best swing interface ever created and the most successful career mode yet implemented, it's the biggest step forward in the genre since *Links 386*.

MEDIEVAL: TOTAL WAR DEVELOPER THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY

PUBLISHER ACTIVISION

It's strategy gaming on a grand scale. Superbly pairing turn-based empire building and real-time combat, it's rich in atmosphere and compelling for long hours. The more you play it, the more you find.

FREEDOM FORCE DEVELOPER IRRATIONAL GAMES

PUBLISHER CRAVE ENTERTAINMENT

For Freedom! This role-playing/strategy hybrid is a charming homage to the silver age of comic books. It's the superhero game fans have been waiting for, and leaves you hungry for its next installment.

SYBERIA DEVELOPER MICROIDS PUBLISHER DREAMCATCHER

Full of images of haunting originality and lacking the abstractness of many adventure games, this is a boon for adventure gaming, capturing all of the elements of that make the genre great.

**5
WORST
GAMES**

SNIPER: PATH OF VENGEANCE This “3D Action Game[sic]” from the creators of *Mortyr* zapped your will to live. It's buggy (some of which were addressed in a 30MB post-release patch) and despite it utilizing the same engine as *No One Lives Forever 2*, it managed to be ugly and slow. The unfortunate timing of its release—it came out right around the time a sniper was terrorizing the Washington DC area—just made its existence that much more unfortunate.

STRIKE FIGHTERS: PROJECT ONE (WAL-MART EDITION) This glorified alpha, and basically non-functional, game was thrown up on consumers and dubbed a “Wal-Mart” edition because it could only be found at that retailer; the “final” version, released a couple of months later, was considerably better, but the damage was done.

MIGHT AND MAGIC IX It's tedious, boring, unsightly, senseless, and buggy. Aside from that, it's great.

1ST CENTURY AFTER TSUNAMI 2265 Convoluted name aside, this anime shooter is amateurish and half-baked.

FARSCAPE As disappointing as it is bad, one of the more innovative sci-fi shows deserved better—much, much better than this.

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GOOD

The best thing about online gaming is you get to play with other people. The worst thing about online gaming is you have to play with other people. Most are friendly, or at least leave you alone, but a small but noticeable number of online players spend more time harassing others than actually playing. They scour the mechanics of a game to somehow get around or even break its rules for their own gratification. Or they do it just to annoy other players. They are The Grieferers.

Griefing has been a part of multiplayer gaming ever since such games existed. Online shooters have their share of angst-producing behavior—from cheating with X-ray vision in *Counter-strike*, to lobbing explosives into your own team's home base in *Team Fortress* and other team-based shooters. When you encounter folks who enjoy those kinds of activities, you can always just leave the server and hope for a better bout with a better-stacked deck. Persistent massively multiplayer games, however, have large populations of intensely dedicated participants and game systems that virtually force social interaction. These games are particularly fertile fields for griefing, and you cannot simply leave the server, as your character lives there. The same dynamics that make these games entertaining make griefing inevitable. Toss in boredom, simplistic game mechanics, and the enormous investment potential victims have in their characters, and you're looking at a virtual playground where fun is measured by the amount of anguish caused to others. If you can believe the "Powers that Post on Message Boards," though, griefing is one of the main things that drive people away from online games. After all, real life is annoying enough.

ANNOYING OTHER PLAYERS AS ENTERTAINMENT THE WORLD OF THE GRIEFERS AND THE DARK SIDE OF PLAYING ONLINE

BY ROBERT MAYER



GRIEF!

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW Despite the bloated End User License Agreements you click through on your way to Norrath or Britannia or Beta Hydri, there's little the publishers of online games can do about overall grieving—it's the lack of real control over player actions that makes it possible.

"Men have no pleasure (but on the contrary a great deal of grief) in keeping company where there is no power able to overawe them all," said noted gamer Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* about what happens when people are given free reign. Grievers exist because any game that's fun to play inevitably lets you out from under its preventive thumb—

anything that actually has a chance of squelching abuse would just drag the game down.

In real life, things like a nightstick upside the head, doing hard time, and the loss of your job, family, friends, and all of your worldly possessions tend to moderate your behavior. In games, the only effective Law is the program itself. With *EverQuest*, Sony found out the hard way that just telling people to play the game

"like it's intended" works about as well as a Taliban-run saloon. When the only thing you have to lose is your online account, and the only torture you'll feel is when someone shouts, "Dude, you really suck" (or worse, mostly), the potential for adequate policing is less than zero. With only a few tools, and even fewer playground monitors for user bases that increasingly run into the hundreds of thousands, online games are still at the mercy of people whose only limits are what they can do, not what they should do.

ANATOMY OF A GRIEFER Multi-User-Dungeon pioneer and sociologist Richard Bartle wrote a seminal article in 1990 on the types of people who play online games. Revised in 1996 as *Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs*, he divided players into four groups: Explorers, Socializers, Achievers, and Killers, the latter of whom he says get their jollies from hunting and destroying other players. To them, the only fun is in the hunt and, inevitably, the kill.

In the ever-popular subset of grieving known as "player killing," it's more fun to trash the guys who have been playing the hardest and have the most to lose. In the early days of *Ultima Online*, you could barely set foot outside your house before a cackling band of marauders would pounce on you. But since most modern massively multiplayer games have all but eliminated non-consensual player killing, these natural



Portrait of Thomas Hobbes, first philosopher of grieving.



Dark Age of Camelot offers group-based player killing as an outlet for aggression.



Hardcore grievers and player killers boast of their accomplishments.

born killers have little choice but to find other grieving outlets to indulge their passions. This is particularly true in non-persistent online games like *Battlefield 1942*, where every time you enter the game, you have nothing to lose. Here, grieving can be even more annoying since takes the form of a continuous flow of minor acts that add up to a major pain for everyone else. Destroying friendly planes, running ships aground, driving tanks to the edge of the map and leaving them there—it's all part of a day's work for the modern griever.

THE HOW AND WHY In a 1993 *Village Voice* article *A Rape in Cyberspace*, Julian Dibble offered some insight into the mind of the griever. Dibble described events on the geekily-termed (even in those days) LambdaMOO MUD where a character named Mr. Bungle virtually raped and severely harassed several participants. Apparently, Mr. Bungle merely liked to watch what happened when he messed with people, and that is pretty much where we still stand today. People grief because they like watching other people squirm; it's the digital equivalent of pulling the wings off of flies.

Modern-day grievers come in all flavors, but the most common are the plain old cheaters. The reasons range from novelty—"Hey, like, it's fun. It's a new way of playing an old game," as one anonymous cheater told us—to sociopathy, like the people who shoot up their own bases and type obscenities in team chat. The rationalization is generally along the lines of, "I shelled out my hard-earned money to buy the game, so don't I have the right to play it as I wish?" This leaves them oblivious to the idea that they just might owe a tad of courtesy to others. Shooters, played on thousands of privately run servers scattered across the world, are especially vulnerable to attack. Without centralized control, cheating is rampant. Servers run by game publishers are not much better; a lack of online policing makes enforcement virtually non-existent.

Even more prevalent than cheating, however, is just being an annoying pest. In games like *Soldier of Fortune II*, with the ability to damage your teammates enabled, it's not uncommon to have one or more players who do nothing but stand around the spawn point killing his comrades. He appears, he's fragged, he appears, he's fragged, he appears, he's fragged, he logs out. Even "player voting," designed to assist self-policing by allowing players to vote anyone out of the game, is an avenue for grieving. Players constantly amuse themselves by, just when the action is getting exciting, calling a vote that brings gameplay to a halt.

Blame it all on *Quake*. The development of QuakeSpy, and the ultimate evolution of in-game browsers and public server technology that created this wonderful, addictive world of

online first-person action, also created a decentralized player management nightmare. Ultimately, the players are to blame as well. Server operators seem uninterested in policing their games, and many players resent any sort of server control over their actions. The sheer quantity of game sessions makes the situation tolerable, but does little to address the real problem.

MASSIVE PROBLEMS The most common form of true grieving occurs in massively multiplayer games. Here, where characters are persistent and time investments are extreme, you find the hardest of the hardcore grievers and their most distressed victims. You also find the most active official anti-grieving efforts, mounted by the companies themselves—after all, they are charging a monthly fee to play the games. The result is a sort of quasi-war, between grievers and game masters, with regular players as the innocent victims caught in the middle. Multiplayer grievers are likely to fit the profile of Bartle's Killers. Their joy in the game, seemingly, comes from causing others distress.

"We really have no idea what the humans sitting at the keyboards are like in real life," says Mythic's Matt Firor about grievers in *Dark Age of Camelot*, "but their in-game personas seem to have the childish desire to figure out the best way to annoy someone and then do it over and over."

The team running *Asheron's Call* adds another dimension—a quest for public notice. The most common type of griever they find is "someone looking for attention," says a representative from Turbine Entertainment. "A griever player only becomes a griever player if they get someone else's attention." Real-life experience doesn't always support the corporate line, however. As anti-grieving efforts become more common, the antisocial gamers are going underground. The most successful grievers are those that balance extreme effects on other players with near invisibility to the powers that be.

OEDIPUS LEX

UCLA psychology professor emeritus Dr. Gerald Goodman thinks that grievers may be asserting a form of independence and individuality. "They want to break the social contract. Why do you want to break a social contract? That's the big question." Goodman's associate Howard Chaing thinks grievers are protesting their loss of status. He and Goodman suggest that when online gaming became more mainstream, it ripped the grievers out of godhead mode. The new world order of gaming makes everyone a geek, and so people who desperately need to be special have to go the extra mile to stand out, even if it means destroying the games they actually enjoy.

Or maybe grieving is a product of a warped sense of

honor. Goodman suggests that griefers regard subjugating themselves to rules and restrictions as somehow dishonorable, thus harassment becomes a way of sticking it to the man who made them agree to that stupid EULA. Violating them creates a new metagame, and it's the mainstream players and companies that host them who are the enemy, not the game's monsters.

BEYOND PK'ING Griefing is something game developers have to deal with on a daily basis. According to the people currently running *Ultima Online*, griefing only reared its head after Electronic Arts split the game world into two areas, one where player killing was allowed and one where it wasn't. After 80% of the players migrated to the non-PK areas, a development that came as something of a surprise, griefing became a real problem. While not all PK'ers became griefers, evidence from the many chronicles of *Ultima*-related griefing and PK activities available on line (Joy of Villainy, for instance, at www.wtf.com/jov) shows that nearly all serious griefers came from the PK community.

In moving to insulate players from character killing, did game developers just make the problem worse? After all, it's easy to stop PKing, but it's impossible to ban the sorts of activities abused by griefers. Chatting, casting spells, lying, trickery, tickling, mimicry, libel, and innovative use of the game mechanics have legitimate as well as illegitimate uses.

One problem is that killing other players has always been a very popular activity. The entire commercial online game sector has gone in the opposite direction, though, because as more people get into gaming, the old school PK'ers have become increasingly irrelevant. It's the age of *The Sims Online* now, not *Meridian 59*. The original MUDs not only created virtual worlds, they freed people from the constraints of real life, with results that were sometimes unpleasant but always dramatic. The original online players lived for this drama; today's gamers—at least most of them—just want to have fun. Once multiplayer gaming made the jump from MUDs on under-utilized university computers to massive commercial enterprises, there was no place for social experimentation. Call it the Elf in the Gray Flannel Suit syndrome—even as a fantasy hero you have to follow the rules...or not.

REFORM SCHOOL The next generation of online games will still have to deal with this issue. Sure, most griefers appear to be sociopaths; the Joy of Villainy site proudly proclaims "This page was created in order to promote evil and crime in online gaming", and many feature stories that revel in "blame the victim" self-justification. For players like this, there's probably no way to direct their efforts constructively. But for every hardened online predator, there are many casual griefers who do what they do out of boredom, curiosity, or a need to make themselves stand out. How can games give

these people a way to distinguish themselves, without turning everyone else into prey?

They can't, not really. Player-killing is only fun to griefers if it isn't part of the game. What developers don't seem to realize is that griefers don't just want to kill, they want to hurt. Getting killed in realm-versus-realm combat in *Dark Age of Camelot* isn't the same as getting killed by someone out of the blue. It doesn't hurt nearly as much.

Of course, leaving player-versus-player combat out altogether does nothing to stop griefing, either. *Earth & Beyond*, which launched without any of that type of combat, has its own share of griefers. They manage to twist the game mechanics and sabotage other gamers, ruining their Valiant Space Traveler personae, and making life miserable for them. Any tool the developers give the players can and will wind up being used by griefers. The problem is in the gamers, not the game.

THE HAUNTED WOOD As online gaming grows in prominence, the challenges will only get more severe. Attempts to broaden the scope of massively multiplayer games beyond the gaming hardcore, like *The Sims Online*, are likely to introduce new problems. Your average experienced online gamer today can take most griefing in stride; the lowly "/ignore" command still does wonders. But what about the neophyte, the child, or the person whose only previous online experience was an AOL game of Hearts?

As Raph Koster, one of the deans of massively multiplayer gaming and the driving force behind *Star Wars Galaxies* has written, "The consequences for the aggressor are light, 'virtual,' easily shrugged off. The consequences for the victim are often traumatic, deeply troubling, not easily recovered from, and quite real."

How well the next generation of massively multiplayer games deals with this trauma will be crucial to the expansion and survival of the medium. How will, say, Electronic Arts deal with people who are paying each month to play *The Sims Online*, when those people start building bondage palaces for fourth-graders, or figure out ways to steal your characters' precious objects? Now that online gaming is hitting the mainstream, griefing is becoming an even bigger issue, with no easy solutions. ●



"This page was created in order to promote evil and crime in online gaming."



Punkbuster hopes to clean up online shooters, but progress is slow.

TECHNICALITIES

resolutions

I wish developers would make a few promises for the new year

You're probably reading this in February, which is the time when you forget about the New Year's resolutions you made and resume drinking, smoking, eating poorly, and stop exercising and/or volunteering your time to the less fortunate. I was going to waste this page making a few resolutions of my own, but what do you care? It's not like I make those games you spend all that time and money on each month. It would be far more useful to find out what the game developers resolutions are, but since none of them will tell us, why not make some up? So here's my list of resolutions I wish upon the world's game developers and publishers:

No more Matrix Cam - I hereby resolve to never again use bullet time, stop time with panning camera, or any of the other way overdone effects that were so cool in the *Matrix* movie. It was tired after it was ripped off once, many moons ago. (Those actually making games with the *Matrix* license, Shiny and Monolith, are exempt from this one.)

Revolving cameras are stupid - I resolve never again to slowly revolve the camera around a talking character. Or a space ship. Or a car. Or a building. I realize that needless camera movement does not add drama to a death animation, weight to a conversation, or make a space station seem more grandiose. It just moves the camera, and it's dumb.

Broader horizons - I promise to draw inspiration from more than the latest cool sci-fi and fantasy movies or novels. Maybe I'll read Homer or Shakespeare to study about epic battles or dramatic conflict. Maybe I'll rent a bunch of old noir films for dialogue inspiration. Even if I'm making another paramilitary action/stealth shooter with tactical team elements, there's a lot I can apply from sources outside Tom Clancy.

Further education - As the capabilities of games advance, so too do I have to improve my skill set. I therefore resolve to actually go to the library a couple times a month. If I'm a level designer, I'll pick up architecture textbooks and do more than look at the pictures. If I'm an animator, I'll read up on acting method and technique and practice it. If I'm writing dialogue, narration, or just scripting a plotline, I'll do more than read other people's fiction but also textbooks and primers on how to improve my writing and storytelling abilities. If I'm involved in any way with a cutscene, I'll study up on applied techniques of cinematography. If I'm a programmer, I'll make use of the tremendous and freely available work being done in the fields of graphics, physical simulation, and AI at universi-

ties. If we can't get our game done on time and under budget, maybe we should take a production management course or two. If our games are to be unique and better than the competition's, we have to stop learning everything we know from our own experience or other game developers.

Quality control matters - I promise this year to stop shipping games that have known problems. There is no excuse at all for a patch to be available on the day of a game's release or right afterward unless our company actually shipped it to stores with known bugs or incomplete testing. Selling products with known flaws and insufficient testing is ethically corrupt, and it's only a matter of time before some consumers set their eye on the industry that makes "more money than Hollywood" and files a class-action suit. The solution is easy: stop shipping stuff we know is broken; make a good QA department maintain a bug list of ZERO during a full week of testing before declaring the product "gold." My resolution is to work that into our production schedules this year.

When it's done - I'm going to stop telling gamers that my game will be out "when it's done." I realize they're not naive enough to believe my publisher accepts that answer and are sophisticated enough to understand that schedules can and do change. Besides, half the time our game ships and it's still not "done" until it's patched up a few months later.

Are there any game developers making these New Year's Resolutions? I doubt it. It's been my experience that most developers don't take any responsibility for what's wrong with their games. It's always the publisher's fault. But if my little slap in the face wakes up just one or two game makers, it's worth it. ●

TIP OF THE MONTH

Automatic login—Don't like typing a password to log onto Windows XP? Just go to the Run menu and type in "control userpasswords2" (without quotes) and press enter. In the User Accounts window that pops up, clear the checkbox requiring users to enter passwords to log in.

Q I hold you responsible for my current dilemma. In the Jan 2003 issue you give the Audigy 2 a great review and you pine on about your love of your Grado headphones. I have just ordered an Audigy 2 sound card, with its Dolby features but plan on using headphones with it. The Grado's get great reviews all over the net but they don't do anything for Surround Sound. Sony offers a Headphone Surround Sound solution but its \$700 and wireless. I don't need wireless and would like to spend less than that on headphones. Ideas?

Dave L.

A. I wouldn't call one sentence in my editorial "pining on about my love" of my Grado headphones, but I'm definitely a fan of headphones for immersive games. You should know that no headphones truly produce "surround sound" in the sense that no matter what you do, you only have two speakers and they're right next to your ears. There are some headphone amplifiers out there that create a sort of "virtual surround" with some fancy signal processing that works well enough, but it's not at all like the experience of truly having speakers in front of and behind you. Many times the faux-surround effect added by headphones just takes a stereo signal and adds some reverb.

The good news is that most really good PC sound cards, when you set them to "headphone" output, do pretty much this same virtual surround thing, often even better than an external headphone amp when it comes to recreating the location of sounds in your games. So go ahead and buy yourself a good pair of headphones (decent ones start at around \$40, really good ones are over \$100), plug them directly into your sound card, and just set the output to "headphones" in the card's speaker settings.

Q How are version histories counted? A 3.3 patch for a game would be the third version, but what's the .3 stand for? And what are builds?

Ted

A. I would love to tell you how version numbers are counted, but honestly there's no consistency to it. The initial version of a product might be version 1.0, but then the first patch could bring it to 1.0a or 1.03 or 1.1 or who knows what number. In general, the number before the decimal is incremented for very major updates, and the numbers to the right of the decimal are incremented for minor fixes or tweaks. So a patch that fixes some bugs and adds a few features might bring a game from 1.23 to 1.4, but the next patch that provided a major overhaul including new content, game modes, and engine capabilities could take it from 1.4 to 2.0. Every developer has their own version numbering policy, so nothing is absolute, but higher is almost always better.

The term "build" has come around because software these days is often incredibly complex, and creating the latest version isn't just a matter of one guy hitting the "compile" button. You have different people working on different parts of the code and lots of art assets to contend with. When you bring these pieces together, that's called a build. We often refer to an "early build" of a game in a preview, and that would be one where many chunks of the code are not quite finished, debugged, or optimized, the gameplay variables aren't tweaked, and the artwork isn't final. All the different pieces are constantly worked on, and subsequent builds more closely resemble a finished product. Eventually a build of the game is good enough to be sent to manufacturing, and that's what we call the "gold master"

(so named because early writeable CDs had a gold tint). The term "build" is used for more than just games, it's appropriate for any software project where multiple people work on different pieces of the project.

Q What is the difference between DDR and RDRAM? Is RDRAM the same as Rambus? Can SDRAM go in a DDR slot? Can 184 pin Rambus (is there such a thing) be used in a 184pin DDR slot?

AWG

A. Yes, RDRAM is the same thing as Rambus RAM, and it is in no way interchangeable with DDR. Either your motherboard supports DDR or RDRAM, but never both, and you can't replace one for the other or mix and match. SDRAM is better left forgotten, it's old news not even worthy of the least powerful modern processors.

Q I own a Dell 4400, and I have both CD-ROM bays used up. I want to get an Audigy 2, but I noticed that the control panel fits in one of those bays. Since both my bays are used, can I still use the control panel of the Audigy 2? Or, would I be better off getting a Extigy?

-Erik L.

A. That front control panel thing is only a feature of the Audigy 2 Platinum, and you can't use it if all your drive bays are filled up. But you can certainly buy a regular Audigy 2, which is the same sound card without the drive-bay mounted inputs and outputs. Don't get an Extigy unless you just have to have a USB sound card (for a notebook, perhaps).

TECHBYTES

S3 DeltaChrome—Although S3's graphics products haven't been of much use to gamers since the days of the Savage 3D, it's back in action. The company recently announced DeltaChrome chip boasts greater vertex and pixel shader capabilities than DirectX 9, per-pixel gamma correction, integrated HDTV controller, and a whole slew of largely meaningless buzzwords. The card supposedly makes use of fancy, new advanced deferred rendering algorithms, which, in plain speak, is stuff that prevents drawing pixels that cover up other

pixels. S3 plans both desktop and mobile versions, with the desktop version to run at about 300MHz for both the core and 128-bit DDR memory. That amounts to a fill rate of 2.4 gigapixels, which is great, and memory bandwidth of 9.6 gigabytes/sec, which is not. If it arrives on time, video cards using S3's DeltaChrome core should show up late in the second quarter.

MacWorld—At the winter MacWorld expo, there was little to get terribly excited about from Apple

Two new versions of the gorgeous titanium PowerBook were unveiled, one petite model featuring a 12" screen and a really large widescreen 17" laptop that's pretty cool even if it does virtually eliminate the value of being portable. The new PowerBooks have switched from ATI to NVIDIA graphics. The bad news is that the latest updates to iTunes, iMovie, iDVD, and iPhoto are now only available bundled together as the iLife suite, bearing a price tag of \$50.

RENDERING

2002

The year that was
in video cards

by Anthony DeLong

If you've been living with that crusty old GeForce3 or Radeon 8500 (or lower) for over a year, you've no doubt played recent games like *Unreal Tournament 2003*, *No One Lives Forever 2*, *Splinter Cell*, or *Battlefield 1942* and seen your frame rates take a nosedive. The situation is only going to get worse in the next few months, with games like *Unreal II*, *Deus Ex 2*, *Tron 2.0*, and more waiting in the wings. Before diving into the next generation of video cards, let's look back and compare the best of 2002. In a change of pace, we're going to list not only the suggested retail price for each card but also the cheapest street price from reputable web vendors. Shop around when spending serious money on your computer hardware; the savings can be substantial.

RUMBLE

Radeon 9700 Pro

ATI's flagship product and our Hardware of the Year totally tipped the scales in the video card battle with NVIDIA. It's almost ridiculously fast, particularly with anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering enabled. It's the first card on the market to offer full DirectX 9 features—even months before DX9's release—and you should start to see the benefit of that by this summer. This thing stands so far above every other



card out there that its only serious competition can come from the GeForce FX, which was *still* not ready for review at press time. It will cost you over \$300 even at a discount; but hey, you were going to spend more than that on your CPU and RAM, right? We gave the card five stars a few months ago, but driver glitches have reared their ugly head in that time. Nothing is bad enough to completely discourage anyone from buying the card, and ATI is doing a great job of making improvements. You can find these cards from ATI and a variety of third-party board vendors like Hercules, Crucial, or Sapphire.

RATING

MSRP \$399
STREET \$329

**Radeon 9700**

If spending more than \$300 is a touch too much for you to swallow, you can get into Radeon 9700-land with the non-pro version, built by variety of NVIDIA's partners using

ATI's chip (the one we tested came from Hercules). It's got everything the Pro card has, including 8 pixel pipelines, a 256-bit memory interface, and all the exact same DX9 hardware features. The only difference



is the speed: the core clock is tuned down from 325 to 275MHz, and the memory from 620 to 540MHz. This shaves about 10-15% off most benchmark scores (it's hard to say why *Serious Sam SE* runs so much slower).

You can generally save about \$80 by opting for the non-pro version, which is just about right for the drop in performance.

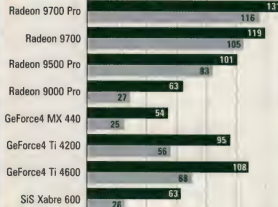
RATING

MSRP \$329
STREET \$245

Radeon 9500 Pro

The inexpensive version of ATI's flagship product is the 9500 Pro, which takes the chip from the 9700 series and sticks it on a board with half the memory bandwidth. (The 9500 pro has a 128-bit memory interface.)

Other than that, it runs at the same clock speeds

**3DMARK 2001 SE (100s)**

as the regular non-pro 9700 and certainly has all the exact same features. What does having half the memory bandwidth do to frame rates? Well, they certainly take a dive, but the card still outperforms the GeForce4 Ti 4600 by a substantial amount. That's right, the Radeon 9500 Pro costs \$50-80 less than the Ti 4600, includes full DX9 features, and is quite a bit faster. Ouch. It has the same minor driver issues as the 9700 cards, but they're forgivable when you're talking about value like this. As with the 9700 Pro, you can find this card from both ATI and its third party board partners.

RATING



MSRP \$219

STREET \$189

Radeon 9000 Pro

For those on a more extreme budget, there's always the Radeon 9000 Pro. ATI deserves a swift kick in the ass for naming this card the 9000, prompting gamers into thinking it offers DirectX 9 features (as the 7000 series were DX7 cards and the 8000 series were DX8 cards). It's essentially a souped-up version of the Radeon 8500, with four pixel pipelines and support for only the DirectX 8 pixel and vertex shaders. Except for the misleading name, it's not a bad card. It's pretty fast, and we'll see games made for DX8 features for quite some time yet. The slightly more expensive GeForce4 Ti 4200 handily outperforms it, and ATI's drivers seem to have more problems with this card than with the 9500 and 9700 series. We tested the 64MB version, but a 128MB card is available for \$20 more.

RATING



MSRP \$129

STREET \$115

GeForce4 Ti 4600

After talking about this card for almost a year, it seems like there's nothing left to say. By now, you know the drill: It has DirectX 8 features, four pixel pipelines, a

128-bit memory interface, and runs at 300MHz with 650MHz RAM. It's fast and all that, but newer, more efficient architectures from ATI have it beat.

Perhaps most damning is that it still costs more than \$250, and you can get one of those 9500 Pros with more features and speed for under \$200 if you look around. The best thing I say about the venerable Ti 4600 is that it's rock-solid stable and reliable, with the best drivers in the video card business. It just works with everything, and that's nothing to sneer at. The card tested was from PNY, but a variety of models from many other manufacturers is available for the same price.

RATING



MSRP \$289

STREET \$265

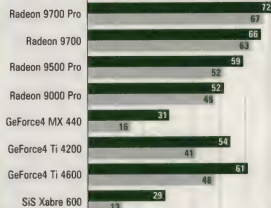
GeForce4 Ti 4200

The original Ti 4200 came in two varieties: a 64MB card with faster memory and a 128MB one with slower memory. Now the cards have

been updated to AGP 8X, and while that alone doesn't really present a tangible performance benefit, the cards now have 128MB versions running at the same memory speed as the old 64MB ones. Beyond the 500MHz



UNREAL TOURNAMENT



memory and 250MHz core clock speeds, this card is identical to a Ti 4600, and has the same benefits and drawbacks. It has the same rock-solid drivers, but it fares much better against the competition performance-wise. It's outperformed and out-featured by the Radeon 9500 Pro, but that card's also a good deal more expensive. The more direct competition is the Radeon 9000 Pro, which is only a little cheaper and a good deal slower in most applications.

RATING



MSRP \$169

STREET \$149

GeForce4 MX 440

The other popular card in the GeForce4 line is the MX 440—with the 460 and 420 models mostly relegated to OEM deals (they're cards you might get in a new computer, not buy on its own). Like the Ti 4200, the MX 440 has been updated for AGP 8X, and again that really provides no benefit, but the slightly boosted memory speed does. The core of the new model still runs at 275 MHz, the memory at just over 500MHz. Don't be confused by the GeForce4 moniker, as these MX cards are not like their Ti brethren. They don't support pixel or vertex shaders (that fancy DX8 stuff games are now starting to make use of), making them less capable than a



GeForce3. It's not that fast anymore, either. Its most direct competition, the Radeon 9000 Pro, has full DX8 features and is quite a bit faster. NVIDIA's fantastic drivers once again keep them out of the doghouse, it's hard to recommend. You can find GeForce4 MX 440 cards just about everywhere from a bunch of different card vendors.

RATING



MSRP \$129

STREET \$115

Xabre 600

SIS dipped its toe into the mainstream graphics market this year with its Xabre, of which the 600 model is supposed to be the one gamers will be interested in. It offers full support for DirectX 8 features and is dirt cheap at about \$99 for a 128MB card. If you can find one, that is. The manufacturing partners are companies like Chaintech that you won't exactly find in your local CompUSA. SIS keeps costs down by using a combination software and hardware T&L engine. The good news is that this means that triangle-crunching performance increases as CPU power does. The bad news is that it's never particularly great, and full hardware T&L would almost certainly be preferred. That's the least of this card's problems, though. We saw glitches in several popular games and visual quality is just terrible. Textures look fuzzy even with the driver's quality/performance slider set all the way on the quality side. Anti-aliasing works, but it's not as good-looking as the implementations of NVIDIA or ATI. To top it all off, performance is about on par with a GeForce4 MX 440. SIS gets kudos for trying to bring DirectX 8 to such a low price point, but no DX8 game is going to run fast enough. A video card isn't a bargain just by being cheap, you have to want to use it, too.

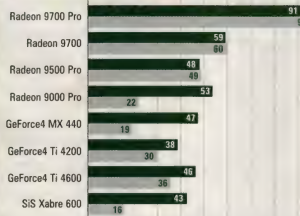
RATING



MSRP \$99

STREET \$89

SERIOUS SAM SE



2002 was a bittersweet year for video cards. On the cover of our April issue, we claimed the GeForce 4 to be "faster than you can imagine." Who would have thought that ATI would come through in the fall was a product that's nearly twice as fast, complete with all those fancy new DirectX 9 features? You also wouldn't have expected them to follow up with cheaper cards based on the same architecture before the year's end. But for the high times NVIDIA brought us early in the year and ATI brought us last fall, 2002 was full of disappointments. Matrox's Parhelia turned out to be so slow and expensive. DirectX 9 arrived a couple months late, and with no software to exploit it, not even a new version of 3DMark. We heard news about amazing new super-cheap cards from companies like Trident or SiS, but when they finally got here it only proved the old axiom that, "you get what you pay for." Perhaps most disappointing, NVIDIA's hot new iron, the GeForce FX, kept getting bumped back

ATI COMES OUT ON TOP

again and again. It was initially scheduled for late summer, then fall, then "before Christmas," and as of January there's still no production-quality cards.

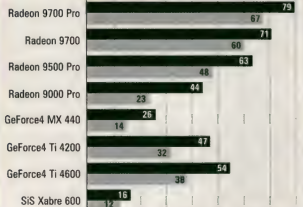
The GeForce 4 cards started off the year with a bang, but that wasn't nearly enough to eclipse ATI's absolutely dominant products at the end of the year. They have three excellent cards. All the Radeon

9500 and 9700 series cards are the fastest, most feature-complete cards in their price classes. Each one represents a huge leap in

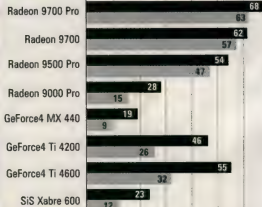
speed and features, and has enough headroom to serve up all the eye candy you'll need throughout the year. The GeForce FX will be here soon, and ATI has something new up their sleeves for the spring as well, but for now, the

GeForce4 Ti 4200 remains the best way to spend \$150, but that value will wane as games that utilize DX9 features start to appear this year. But surprisingly enough, ATI dominates the high-end and midrange video card segments.

NOLF2



AQUANOX





VELOCITYTM

m i c r o

"Bottom Line: Add Velocity Micro to our short list of highly recommended premier system builders."
Editor's Choice
PC Gamer, July 2002



"Record-setting scores and elite components put the ProMagix in league with the big boys."
Kick Ass Product
MaximumPC, August 2002



"Velocity Micro machines flex some muscle"
Computer Shopper, October 2002



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(Not) MO'MO Money

RATING



MANUFACTURER Logitech [www.Logitech.com]
MSRP \$99

Logitech's original MOMO

Force is a superb driving controller, with a leather-wrapped wheel, aluminum pedals, steel paddle shifters, and most importantly, optional racing stripes. At \$200, it's also rather pricey.

Enter the MOMO Racing Force Feedback Wheel, a lower-cost version that dumps some of the niceties (rubber replaces leather, plastic replaces metal, and tragically, there are no racing stripes) while retaining the same solid feel. While the change in materials makes it less appealing to the touch, the newer wheel design is identical to the more expensive one and still features ideal spoke placement. Unfortunately, the pedals are light and plastic-y, and they have a tendency to slide across the floor with heavy driving. A shifter, which is unique to the new wheel, is a good addition.

Though not exactly cheap, this is a quality mid-range wheel. If it suffers in comparison to its expensive sibling, the superior wheel design and quality of its steering action and force effects still makes it a better choice for race fans than Microsoft's similarly priced Sidewinder wheel. —Steve Bauman

Free as a Bird

RATING



MANUFACTURER Logitech [www.Logitech.com]
MSRP \$69

Considering the glut of cables on your average desk, a wireless joystick makes a lot of sense. File the transmitter off on some remote corner and you're always ready for some serious gaming without the need to get on your hands and knees to plug the stick in the back of your machine. (Those for-

tunate enough to have front-mounted USB ports are laughing.)

The Logitech Freedom 2.4—the 2.4 refers to the 2.4GHz frequency this wireless device operates over—is a good-looking stick, with brushed aluminum



styling and metal highlights. The stick design and main trigger placement is excellent, and the throttle features superb action that's tighter and less sloppy than most. Though the stick itself initially feels rather stiff, you quickly get used to its solid feel.

Unfortunately, the rest of the stick is something of an ergonomic disaster. The triangular base makes it nearly impossible to hold in your lap, which is part of the benefit of being wireless; you're not chained to your desk. More problematic, the buttons are tiny and too close together, so it's too easy to hit them when using the hat switch. The default "2" button is in a particularly unfortunate location. You can actually get used to most of its quirks and layout issues, but in light of all of the other joysticks on the market, it's



hardly worth the effort unless you really want a wireless device. —SB

Pedals of Steel

RATING

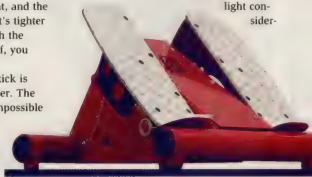


MANUFACTURER Extreme Competition Controls
[www.ecci.net] MSRP \$199

If you're serious about racing—and anyone who even thinks about spending \$200 on a set of pedals falls into that category—look no further than Extreme Competition Controls' E-3000 racing pedals.

Designed to replace the cheap pedals that accompany most steering wheel controllers, this 20-pound slab of steel stands up to serious usage. These things ain't moving. The pedals are enormous but comfortable, even for long race sessions, and the adjustable tension settings let you tune them to your heart's content. The default seems perfect for most drivers and the

action is surprisingly light-consider-



ing how heavy-duty the unit looks, but as always, your mileage may vary.

Aside from price, the only real downside to the pedals is that they currently only work with two steering wheels, Microsoft's Sidewinder and Logitech's older Formula Force; it's particularly unfortunate the unit doesn't work with the superior Logitech MOMO wheels, though ECCI says it will produce connectors for other wheels if there's demand. And if you're serious about racing, these pedals are definitely worth demanding.

The E-3000 is only available online at www.ecci.net. —SB

got speed ?

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Best gross ever

Met Shrine



Hoarmen? No thanks—I already have plenty!



Lugian Tacticians can build turrets: static weapons capable of killing any monsters that come near them.

Asheron's Call 2: Fallen Kings

The best leveling treadmill money can buy

by Benjamin E. Sones

GENRE Online Role-playing **DEVELOPER** Turbine [www.turbinegames.com] **PUBLISHER** Microsoft [www.microsoft.com]
REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 733, 256MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** Massively **ESRB** Mature

There is a new generation of online role-playing games in the works, and *Asheron's Call 2: Fallen Kings* is the first of its ilk to arrive. It's a monster of a game, with three vast continents to explore, graphics that push even the latest hardware to its limits, and a highly refined set of game mechanics based on three years spent in the trenches with the game's predecessor. Turbine Entertainment has rebuilt the world of Dereth from scratch, jumping forward hundreds of years in their fictional timeline. The new Dereth is a post-apocalyptic land, with survivors (that's you) emerging from their underground shelters to explore the new world above.

Turbine's goal is to provide a stronger narrative focus than past online role-playing games have offered. As you explore, you uncover bits of information about the world via the "Vault campaign." Caches of knowledge are stored in a series of under-

ground Vaults spread across the land; make your way to the end of one and you are rewarded with a cut scene describing some aspect of Dereth's forgotten past. Dereth's future is another matter. Turbine plans to add monthly episodic content to carry the story forward—the first episode, "Emergence," went live in December—and flesh out the details of the setting.

In spite of its interesting approach, *Asheron's Call 2* still feels fundamentally like the same online role-playing game that you have been playing since *EverQuest*. At the most basic level, you can boil the game down to this: you kill monsters to gain levels so that you can kill more monsters, which is an endless treadmill of repetition. The narrative content adds a little window dressing, but only a very little. If you are looking for a fresh experience in online role-playing, keep looking. This is not it.

At least it is the best leveling treadmill around. The game mechanics are refined, easy to learn, friendly to low-level characters, and flexible. Where other games might confine your character to small and crowded "newbie zones" until you earn enough experience to survive in the wilds, *Asheron's Call 2* has you traveling long distances and exploring vast landscapes from the moment you finish the game's short and excellent tutorial. The first quests, which you stumble across almost immediately, provide incentive to explore the continent and teach you how to use Dereth's handy system of magical Portals and Ringways.

The game has a fantastic system of skill-based character advancement that allows you to build any sort of character that you want and then spend experience points to augment the skills that you like the best. You can even "untrain" skills,

Extraordinary ★★★★★ Excellent ★★★★★

Haybe ★★★★★ Mediocre ★★★★★ Contemptible ★★★★★

< REVIEWS

freeing up the skill points that you spent on them so that you can redesign your character (experience points spent to augment skills are lost forever, however).

In a genre notorious for complicated, ugly, and user-hostile interfaces, this is a breath of fresh air. The interface is simple, attractive, and easy to use... mostly. Inventory management is its weak point, and there is a lot of it. There is a pause every time you try to examine or move an item, and you can only move items one at a time. So when you kill a creature, you have to "open" its corpse (pause), click on an item to see what it is (pause), drag it to your inventory (pause), then either keep it or convert it to gold (pause), and do the same for all the other items the creature is carrying (pause pause pause). The game is sorely in need of a "take all" or "convert all to gold" button. At least they eliminated the "Are you sure you want to convert this item into gold" dialog box that used to come up every time you tried to convert an item.

With a detailed setting and an epic, evolving storyline, this might represent a huge leap forward for online role-playing. Unfortunately, *Asheron's Call 2* has neither of those things. Despite Turbine's focus on narrative content, the world of Dereth has little depth or sense of place, and storyline thus far is even thinner than the game manual.

The game mechanics are partly to blame. Many of the design decisions trade verisimilitude for game balance, and the experience suffers as a result. The economy, for example, is entirely player-based; there are no stores or merchants, and every item in the game is found, created, or traded among players. This system works well mechanically, but makes little

sense fictionally. Why are unintelligent monsters such as Darkfoul Hens (basically evil chickens) dragging around shields, boots, and longbows? How are characters able to transmute any item directly into gold? Why do players have to spend money to craft items if there are not any stores? Why is there any money at all in a post-apocalyptic world driven by a barter economy?

A highly detailed in-game map shows you where all the important dungeons, Vaults, and places of interest are located, so there is also little sense of exploration or discovery. How does your character, who has been living underground in a shelter, have such a detailed map of the world?

"Places of interest" is a relative term; most of the ruined towns look largely the same, though there is a different "theme" for each continent, and the various dungeons and Vaults are merely different iterations of the same pointless maze. Dereth feels less like a living world and more like scenery—albeit pretty scenery—provided to give you something to look at while you fight monsters. After 70 hours of play, you can sum up everything that you have learned about the history of Dereth and the ongoing storyline in a sentence or two without leaving anything out.

You can sum up the appeal of the game with similar brevity: *Asheron's Call 2* is a technically excellent, but ultimately shallow and mechanical, experience. The catch is that it may not stay that way. The monthly episode system gives Turbine a means of fleshing out the world, add to the narrative, and make the setting more interesting. The first episode did less of this than it could have, providing a few new quests based on a short but interesting monster



Crafting is a tedious process that forces you to spend even more time fumbling with the cumbersome inventory system. >>> Nice, uh, pet.

invasion. Turbine promises even more of this sort of thing in future episodes, however, along with mechanical changes and other new content. It is tough to grade potential, however. For now, there is not enough of this content to provide more than a brief respite from the leveling treadmill.

UPSIDE

Gorgeous, slick interface and excellent game mechanics

DOWNSIDE

An uninteresting game world that leaves you with a largely mechanical experience

RATING

★★★★★

Hearts of Iron

Suppose they gave a war and nobody could figure it out

by Tom Chick

GENRE Strategy **DEVELOPER** Paradox Entertainment [www.paradoxplaza.com] **PUBLISHER** Strategy First [www.strategyfirst.com] **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium III 300, 64MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Everyone

Who better to squeeze all the ingredients of the cauldron of World War II into a game than the creators of *Europa Universalis*, the hugely ambitious, wide-ranging, deep and complex strategy game that covers 400 years of war, diplomacy, economic development, exploration, and invention? With *Hearts of Iron*, Paradox Entertainment applies that same dizzying breadth to the world for a single decade.

Right out of the gate, *Hearts of Iron* hits you like a dense wall of rules, text, numbers, choices, icons, and displays, all spilled out across a map of the world split into a thousand provinces. The tutorial scratches that wall for you. The occasionally obtuse manual pokes a few holes in it. The detailed tool tips tear out the odd plank or brick. But to really get past this wall and into the game proper, you have two choices: spend a few hours online poring over the forums and FAQs, or just suck it up and accept that a lot of this game isn't going to make any sense for a while. Before you're really playing *Hearts of Iron*, you're going to have to contend with a hundred questions like "What does this do?", "How do these work?", and "Why did that happen?".

Once you've come to terms with this overbearing and sometimes admirable density, you find an exciting game in which you can assume the role of any nation in the world for the duration of World War II. Diplomatically, the world is split into three factions, the Allies, the Axis, and the Communists. The members of the faction with the most countries at the end of the game win. There's a streamlined resource model at work that recalls Frog City's superlative *Imperialism* games. With your country's basic production, you have to meet consumer demand to prevent revolts, produce enough materiel to run your military, and use the rest to build new units and research new technologies. One of *Hearts of Iron*'s strengths is the technology tree, a marvel of detail and choice that extends all the way to Cold War technologies like ICBMs, nuclear-powered submarines, surface to air missiles, and helicopters.

It's all very exciting as you're learning it, peeling back the layers of detail, figuring out the system, and watching the war unfold, literally one day at a time, division by division, squadron by squadron, and ship by ship. But the more you learn, the more you see that the lack of documentation is just the beginning of the problem. Far worse is that the interface and AI simply aren't up to the monumental task of recreating World War II in this much detail. It's as if Paradox built something so big and specific that they couldn't connect all the loose ends, so they just closed them up behind a wall of rules, text, numbers, choices, icons, and displays. Once you're over that wall, the real questions begin:

Why does the AI do such incredibly moronic and nonsensical things? Why can't it figure out basic concepts like moving troops with transports or sending bombers around fighter screens? Why

does it invade a mountainous region with a single division of cavalry and then leave it there to starve? Why is there no working provision for intelligence or espionage? Why don't surrounded countries on the brink of conquest give in to territorial demands? Why is the interface so convoluted? Why is it impossible to automate important naval and air functions like patrols? Why can't you adjust your industrial capacity allocations with any precision? Why aren't there more hotkeys? Why aren't the existing hotkeys documented



Go ahead and roll into France 4 years early – the AI won't mind

anywhere? Why does Paradox still insist on hard-coding backwards mousewheel support? And who on earth thought this game was comfortably playable?

And so on. In some games, AI and interface issues are like the idiosyncrasies of an eccentric uncle you can't help but love, but here they collapse this precarious game like a house of cards. Although Paradox has always been good about post-release support, two patches still haven't addressed most of the major problems. In the end, there's not much you can do beyond throwing up your hands and proclaiming, "Oh what a mess." An ambitious mess, a noble mess, certainly a well-intentioned mess, but ultimately a mess nonetheless.

UPSIDE

DOWNSIDE

RATING

An ambitious, complex, and in-depth treatment of World War II...
...that falls apart

★ ★ ★ ★ ★



humanoid Kariaks or the slightly less humanoid (to quote the manual, "bug-like") Darzok. Despite their evolution amid environments toxic by human standards, these aliens build the exact same four classes of ship: fighters, corvettes, cruisers, and battleships, each with the exact same weapon classes and hull upgrades, and even share mankind's taste for bio-mechanical sports spheres. To accuse the human characters frequently notifying you of the latest catastrophe during the missions of being two-dimensional would be an insult to width. Worse, your usually simple objectives aren't always clear, and fairly obvious scripting bugs, particularly early on, have you restarting levels without knowing where you went wrong. Couple all this with nothing resembling a decent on-screen tutorial and your first hour with *Hegemonia* is excruciating.

It's clear that the design team lavished the bulk of its energies on the visuals, and though *Hegemonia*'s depiction of space doesn't convey *Homeworld*'s sense of lonely immensity, the swirling nebula clouds, pockets of asteroid dust, and spaceship textures at least equals Relic's game in every respect. There are some amusing touches too: the suns burn your ships up if they stray too close, and when something as large like an orbital military base explodes, your entire screen judders as if the entire universe is rocking on its moorings.

There's a world of difference between good dumb and bad, though. *Hegemonia* lacks depth—literally, in the sense that the z-axis is more or less ornamental. It may be true 3D in a court of law, but the way the maps are designed, it doesn't feel like it. The planets and moons rotate but don't seem to revolve; ships, asteroids, and all heavenly bodies all occupy the same flat plane, even neighboring systems. There's zero sense of cosmic up or down.

A similar lack of imagination pervades the combat mechanics. Ironically, the process of building colony ships and tweaking your planets' production and research with a set of friendly resource screens and sliders is more than half the fun, as there seems to be little decision-making involved once battle is joined. In a nutshell, bigger ships devour smaller ships. More ships will beat fewer ships. Weapon types—turret vs. blaster/ proton vs. missile—seem irrelevant to the outcome as long as you have numbers on your side.

Another problem is scale. You build ships in squads of four or less, and the biggest ones, battleships, are a squad unto themselves, though they're not much larger than cruisers, the next step down. You can only afford upkeep for six squads or so, and since the

small fighters and even corvettes are useless against real firepower, a typical battle involves only a handful of "big" ships. There's nothing like *Homeworld*'s marvelous array of battle formations. And everything seems to take time: moving, researching, mining, especially planetary bombardment, even with the game speed ratcheted up to its modest maximum of 4X.

Despite all this, *Hegemonia* gives you so many intriguing possibilities, it's fairly engaging even when no fighting's going on. Cloaked spy ships knocking out otherwise impregnable orbital defenses, terraforming volcanic worlds into forests via turbulent white aureoles, peppering a wormhole with mines to sand-bag unsuspecting merchant ships as they emerge—it's all almost enough to make you forget the long, dry intervals between.

UPSIDE

Appealing particle effects, a compelling micro-management model, lots of little things

DOWNSIDE

Lack of polish, lack of depth, lots of little things

RATING

★ ★ ★

Hegemonia: Legions of Iron

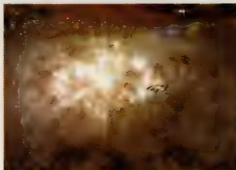
Homeworldia Europa

by Kelly Wand

GENRE Real-time Space Strategy
DEVELOPER Digital Reality **PUBLISHER** Dreamcatcher Interactive
www.hegemonia.info **REQUIREMENTS**
 Pentium III 600, 128MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER None **ESRB** Teen

If space real-time strategy games were sword-and-sorcery movies, *Hegemonia* would rank somewhere between *Krull* and *Notting Hill*. Its uneasy fusion of pick-your-tech-tree-and-wait resource micro-management (cf. *Master of Orion* and the company's own *Imperium Galactica* series) with the camera-funky space fleet combat epitomized by *Homeworld* makes for a sedate, administrative feel occasionally broken up by a shower of extremely pretty lights. Up to a point, the lush, dreamy graphics and energetic explosions (courtesy of the indeed robust "Walker Engine" touted on the box) help mask the atrocious dialogue and lack of battle tension, but it's the bits and bobs of colonization and empire-building that might keep you playing a bit longer than expected.

Instead of *Homeworld*'s indistinguishable space-faring tribes, *Hegemonia*'s single-player campaign lets you choose between the indistinguishable Terrans and human Martians. You also butt heads with two alien races accessible in multiplayer, the



Putting the "Ole!" back in "wormhole."



Cats and dogs develop relationships, even with each other. >>> [Right] Training a pet is time consuming, but the trainer downtown will instruct your cat to play a toy piano, for a fee.

The Sims Unleashed

RATING



GENRE Real-Life Simulator Expansion

DEVELOPER Maxis REQUIREMENTS The Sims

MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

As if parties, dates, and tropical vacations weren't enough, the latest addition to the *Sims* universe, *The Sims Unleashed*, adds even more hilarity in the form of animals. It lets you adopt a cat or dog, play with strays in the neighborhood, or call Animal Control to get rid of that pesky raccoon that keeps digging in your trash. If you're an enthusiast of all things Sim, grab your Pooper-Scooper and hop on the Old Town Shuttle for a great addition to the neighborhood.

Sims Unleashed comes in a two-disc set, finally allowing complete installation without having to dig out *Livin' Large*. The new neighborhood screen integrates existing neighborhoods into a new format that includes both residential and commercial lots. Many properties are cheaper than in previous expansions, so your home can be your castle without forcing you to clean out the treasury to build it.

The pets are more than typical objects but something less than a regular Sim. Adopting a cat or dog adds another character with physical and social needs, but less physical control; you can lead them to water, but you can't make them drink. Pet them, play with them, teach them

tricks, or switch the control to the pet and lead it around the house. If you want a low-maintenance pet, try a fish or reptile; they only require feeding and don't interact on their own.

With more careers, more objects, and a better-organized option control, *Unleashed* allows more versatility and easier movement among features. The pets are great for social interaction, although it'd be nice to see the iguana do more than just sit there. Unlike *Hot Date* and *Vacation*, *Sims Unleashed* doesn't bring any major changes to the game, but adding a pet is a good way to round out the *Sims* experience. —Jessica Theon



Zoo Tycoon: Marine Mania

RATING



GENRE Expansion Pack DEVELOPER Blue Fang

GAMES REQUIREMENTS Zoo Tycoon

MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Everyone

The *Marine Mania* expansion to *Zoo Tycoon* adds aquatic exhibits.

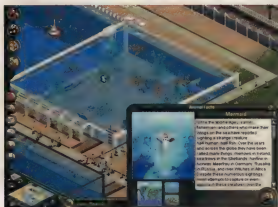
Maybe that description is too basic, but it's all you need to know to determine if it's worth your money. If you like *Zoo Tycoon* and want to make exhibits with Killer Whales, Dolphins, Sharks, and other Sea World fare, you'll get a kick out of it. But if you find the original game lacking in more fundamental ways, don't bother.

The new marine exhibits differ from

traditional animal pens in that they're housed in big water tanks, which can be made deeper or shallower and raised/low-ered so that your zoo guests can peer in the sides. Terrain is unimportant, but you'll need to populate the animal's living quarters with shelters, rocks, and flora, just as with the land-walkers. The dinos of *Dinosaur Digs* needed scientists to care for



Everyone loves watching the killer whale show.



Drop a mermaid statue in a tank and it will spring to life!

them, and the aquatic animals require wet-suit-clad marine specialists. There's only one new gameplay element but it's a pretty cool one: you can create a show tank where certain animals will run through a series of tricks, some of which require special objects and research. It's all quite expensive, but charging for admission to these shows is a great way to make money, and the ability to customize the show program is more compelling than it sounds. Rounding out the new stuff is the expected assortment of marine-themed vending opportunities and animal houses.

An average expansion pack merely adds some compelling new content to a game, and a great expansion pack seriously improves the core game. *Marine Mania* does not. *Zoo Tycoon* still has one of the best interfaces in its genre, but it still lacks a speed control, the ability to scroll the play area by click-and-drag, and an option to move or rotate already-purchased items. This expansion's saving grace? It includes the first one, *Dinosaur Digs*, plus a \$10 rebate for people who already bought it, making this a seriously good deal. —Jason Cross

World War II: Panzer Claws

RATING



GENRE Real time strategy DEVELOPER Zuxxez Entertainment PUBLISHER Eidos
REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 450, 128MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER 2-8 Players, Internet, LAN
ESRB Teen

Do you love WWII so much that you forgave the *Medal of Honor* expansion for its sticky bombs and snipers? Were you will-

ing to wade through the shuffling mess of tiny murky uncontrollable units in *Sudden Strike*? If so, then *Panzer Claws* is the game for you!

This is Zuxxez's latest incarnation of its *Earth 2150* engine, which has been passed around in various incarnations. The basic theme has been sci-fi real time strategy, with cloaking, hovercrafts, energy shields, mechs, various flavors of laser beams, that sort of thing.

Unless you saw how well the system was adapted for *World*

War III: Black Gold, you'd think it would be ill-suited for a World War II game. And you'd be right.

The attempts to give the *Earth 2150* engine its World War II flavor are largely cosmetic. The three almost homogenous sides are named after belligerents in the war. The tanks and vehicles have historical names and are shaped enough like their historical counterparts that you won't know one from the other unless you've played enough wargames to know a Panzer from a Sherman.

Considering that the AI seems modeled after a hybrid of suicidal human wave tactics and bumper cars, it's hard to make any sense out of whatever paper/rock/scis-

sors system Zuxxez was trying to create in the name of historical authenticity. But if you really love World War II, you won't mind too much because you'll be delighted at the little half-tracks and Kubelwagens.

The silliest change is the addition of different types of infantry units. These are modeled as nearly identical blocks of frantic insects under a floating numeral, scurrying about in spite of any orders they may have been given, as if they were fleeing in terror from the giant number looming overhead (incidentally, the number represents how many men are in the "squad").

The structures you build on the map serve as prerequisites for advanced units. No matter where your buildings are, your units stumble in from the map edge as if they'd just arrived from the game next door, giving their placement as much tactical significance as the soundtrack. Some maps have trains, which you can scout along the track if you're bored of watching tanks scurry around and squander ammo. Vehicles have headlights that you can switch on. This allows you to show your obsession with World War II by flipping them on and off and on and off, like Glenn Close with the lamp in *Fatal Attraction*. Because if you're playing *Panzer Claws*, then there's no doubt that you must really, really, really love World War II. —Tom Chick





The Neocron plaza, where players meet to buy gear and services. >>> [below] Futuristic strippers do their part to make the world of Neocron a friendlier place.

Neocron

It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine

by Adam Fleet

GENRE Massively Multiplayer Shooter **DEVELOPER** Reakktor [www.reakktor.com] **PUBLISHER** CDV [www.cdv.de]
REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 64MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** Massively **ESRB** Mature

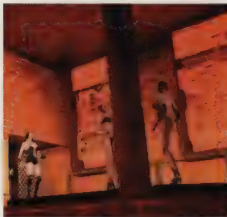
Like so many cyberpunk tales before it, the story of *Neocron* begins with the destruction of the world. Centuries after a nuclear war the Earth is a wasteland of radiation. Mankind has gone to the stone-age and back, and a new era of technological advancement has arisen. The dream of a better life in a galaxy far far away has robbed the planet of much of its population. Those who remain fight daily to survive. If it's not the mutants, it's the war machines, or the gangsters, or the revolutionaries, or maybe even someone in your own faction trying to get ahead. Welcome. Now watch your back.

Elaborate back-story aside, *Neocron* is a massively multiplayer experience that blends first person shooter elements into a complex role-playing system. With strong similarities to games like *System Shock* and *Deus Ex*, the result is a game that feels like a slow paced shooter where what you can do is determined by how you distribute the points gained from leveling in five primary attributes: strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, and psi. Each attribute has a number of subskills in which to spend points, such as researching and building items, driving vehicles

game has a built-in clan system, and most people eventually end up joining one. Clans not only afford opportunities for teamwork, but also allow players to engage in the ongoing fight to control the outposts in the wasteland, which confer large bonuses to various trade skills. These bonuses are necessary to make the best items in the game.

As with any massively multiplayer game, finding the balance of all the skills and equipment is an ongoing battle, and one that *Neocron* is winning. The game has already been patched repeatedly, but more work is still needed. Stability can be a problem at times, and occasional crashes to the desktop are not uncommon, as are bad spawns, such as entering a new area high off the ground and other similar problems, and some strange clipping oddities. There also seems to be a strange mismanagement in the scarcity of some items, where certain medium range equipment is actually harder to find than the top of the line gear.

Overall, *Neocron* is a very enjoyable multiplayer experience, but one that takes some adjusting. This is not a shooter in the true sense. You cannot jump into the game and ride your twitchy *Quake* skills to victory. It is primarily a role-playing landscape, and character building is the name of the game. Some things are still not working right, but even with its faults, *Neocron* is an interesting game. There is a great deal of depth in the game's history for the developers to build on, and a great deal of depth in the skill system for players to explore. The story of *Neocron*, city at the end of the world, has just begun.



UPSIDE

Rich story, solid skill set and character building, clan battles galore

DOWNSIDE

Some technical problems, not newbie-friendly, lack of interesting missions

RATING

★★★★★

GENRE Flight Sim **DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER** Jaleco (www.jaleco.com) **REQUIREMENTS** Pentium II 500, 256MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** Massively Multiplayer **ESRB** Everyone

Four years ago, Microsoft must have figured that whole *Air Warrior/Warbirds* thing might take off, so it published VR1's *Fighter Ace*. Then *EverQuest* exploded, and suddenly the subscription fees from a few hundred flight sim geeks really weren't worth the effort. Good-bye *Fighter Ace*, hello *Asheron's Call*. But VR1 kept working on the sim and eventually joined with Jaleco to publish it. Version 3.0 was the first major post-Microsoft upgrade and now version 3.5 marks its transition to retail.

Fighter Ace 3.5

For this robust online flight sim, there is life after *EverQuest*

by Tom Chick

For \$20, you a get box with a CD in it and a three-month account. Each month thereafter is \$10 for unlimited play. You used to be able to download *Fighter Ace*, but with the latest upgrade to version 3.5 the graphics got too fat, and it shows. For an online game with a hearty physics model, there's a lot of eye candy here. There are special effects like dust and water kicked up from propeller wash. There are useful effects like volumetric clouds that block your sight and break the padlock view. And then there are gratuitous little touches like distressed paint jobs, ejecting shell casings, fancy rippling water, and ships that keel over and slowly sink when you torpedo them. Ground structures and terrain are pretty simplified, but when everything else looks this good, so what?

There are nearly 100 plane models in here and everything's flyable. The scoring system takes into account the relative values of different aircraft, so there's an incentive to fly underdogs that you might not normally use. When's the last time you saw someone voluntarily fly a P-39 instead of a P-51? Since you lose points if you don't bring your plane home, you get real world situations like trying desperately to keep wounded bird up long enough to get her down on the runway (the damage model is one of the finest you'll find in a flight sim). The scoring even takes into account the relative number of players on a team and whether you bail out over hostile territory.

Players also rack up points for their personal ranking with bombing missions. The simplified bomb sites make it easy to drop your payload exactly where you want it and the AI controlled gunners often rack up a few kills for you. A formation of heavy bombers (there's an autopilot to keep you in formation with other bombers) will cut through a lot of fighters.



It's not every sim that sees the German Luftwaffe tangling with a US Navy fighter from the Pacific. >>> *Left* A British bomber enjoying the excellent damage system.



Fighter Ace is split up into several online arenas, divided according to realism settings and gameplay styles. You can almost always find a cluster of folks messing around in the arcade free-for-all games, which are fun in a sort of yee-haw, hold-down-the-trigger, don't-worry-about-your-six, deathmatch-in-the-sky way. The greatest number of players tends to hang around the intermediate arenas, which include team melees divided by nationality and a strategic game where you fight for territory. The strategic game runs by some fairly esoteric rules that model resource gathering and lines of supply. Once you figure out how it works, it's gratifying to fly close air support for an assault or to see a ship full of tanks delivered

to an enemy island. But this doesn't seem to happen a lot, since most players seem to be chasing kills instead of trying to coordinate the actions. VR1's rich strategic game is sometimes an instance of pearls before fighter jock swine.

Although there are weekly events for the truly competitive realism junkies, it's disappointing that more players don't take advantage of *Fighter Ace*'s superbly detailed physics and intricate flight models. But the upside is that once you get past the bewildering array of keyboard commands, it's easy to get into the game. You won't spend weeks getting shot down before

you score your first kill. There are offline tutorials and practice arenas as well as regular online training opportunities. New players will especially appreciate the recording feature, which lets you replay a game offline, frame by frame and from any angle.

Regardless of how people choose to play *Fighter Ace*, the bottom line is that version 3.5 has something for everyone who has a joystick connected to his computer. And for those of you who don't, this is a good way to explore what online gaming has to offer once you get tired of first-person shooters and role-playing level treadmills.

UPSIDE

A little something for everyone: graphics, variety, action, strategy, realism, accessibility

DOWNSIDE

Are the players taking full advantage of what it has to offer?

RATING

★★★★★

FIFA Soccer 2003

RATING

★★★★★

GENRE Soccer Simulation DEVELOPER EA Sports
 REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 350, 64MB RAM
 MULTIPLAYER 2-16 Players; Internet, LAN
 ESRB Everyone

EA Sports has turned the most popular arcade sports series into a simulation. *FIFA Soccer 2003* has been rebuilt from the ground up, and the improvements tighten up gameplay and make for a more realistic depiction of the sport that has followers from Albania to Zimbabwe.

Play on the pitch is completely different from the pinball soccer favored in recent years by EA Sports. The designers have separated the ball from the player's foot, a seemingly minor enhancement that changes the fundamental character of the entire game. Instead of running helter skelter with no worries of losing control of the ball, you now have to carefully measure your pace to keep possession. Couple this with computer-controlled defenders who are more intelligent when it comes to marking and you can no longer make the long runs that were commonplace in past editions of the series. As in real soccer, the key to success is ball control, good passing, and using your entire team. The only cause for complaint is the speed of your opposition, as enemy defenders catch you so quickly that the computer has to be cheating.

[right] In-game camera angles give the game a TV broadcast feel. >>> Below left] Play at Old Trafford with the Premier League's Manchester United. >>> [below right] Close-ups take you onto the pitch.



FIFA 2003 continues in the series tradition of including lots of content. Over 8,000 real players are featured on more than 350 teams playing both internationally and in the world's top leagues. It also continues the EA Sports tradition of moving the bar when it comes to video and audio. The graphics have been improved with more detailed player models and animations and the detailed depiction of the home stadiums of more than a dozen top teams, from England's Manchester United to Turkey's Galatsaray. And sound quality is unparalleled, with play-by-play again coming from the esteemed John Motson.

As unexpected as they are welcome, these enhancements make an already popular game an even hotter commodity. *FIFA Soccer 2003* is the most impressive addition to the long-running series since the now legendary *Road to World Cup 98*, and one of the best sports games released in the past year on any platform.—Brett Todd



You are Michael, a sweaty Fabiormorph on the prowl for eeeeeevil.

Archangel

RATING

★★★★★

GENRE Third-person Action DEVELOPER Metropolis Software
 REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 600, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER None
 ESRB Mature

Somewhere, a skinny fifteen year old boy, imagination alive with images culled from years of *Doom* and *D&D*, is avidly penciling out the first draft of the design document for the game he's going to write. It'll be awesome: it'll have ZOMBIES, and DEMONS, and reference to the BIBLE. There'll be BLOOD. And CROSSES, and, oh yeah: ROCKET LAUNCHERS. Oh man, it'll rock.

Fortunately for this eager kid, developer Metropolis was thinking the same thing, and made that very game. And just like this fictitious fanboy, its effort, *Archangel*, plays out just like a game designed by a fifteen-year-old kid might: it's all dark, edgy images mixed with repetitive, unimaginative hack-and-slash action and hastily inserted platform jumping elements. Taking on the role of "Michael," a bare-chested, gravel-voiced, shaggy-maned hero, you get to traverse three "worlds"—an old-world monastery, the war-torn Berlin of the future, and, of course, a City in Hell! (Extra exclamation points may be added at your discretion.) Despite a few interesting monster designs eagerly thieved from Japanese manga and the works of Giger, most of the game is a dreadful hodge-podge of glitchy and poorly-designed locales, rife with garish textures and separated by soul-draining load times. But, oh man, you get to choose a demonic warrior or a stealthy ninja ghost



as your alter ego! Awesome! Or would be, if any part of the game actually made that decision meaningful. Mostly, you just fetch stuff and fight big dumb bosses, pausing to reload regularly and laugh at the terribly unpolished cut-scenes apparently voiced by the janitorial staff.



Garlic, crucifixes, bah. All you need to defeat the forces of Hell is regular circle-strafing.

At its core, *Archangel* is all self-absorbed scenario development, an endless circle-strafe packed to its pimply neck with occult imagery and amateurish design. Beveled skull textures and satanic temples may be the modern equivalent of Iron Maiden edgy cool, but if this game is any indicator, it takes more than just adolescent zeal to back it up. —Douglas L. Erickson

Cossacks: Back To War

RATING



GENRE Real-time Strategy DEVELOPER GSC
Game World REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 500, 256
RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-7 Players; Internet, LAN
ESRB Teen

The *Cossacks* series must have a significant following somewhere. What else would convince the publisher to sign off on two expansion packs over the course of one year? So does lightning strike thrice? In this case, yes, but it leaves fairly desolate gameplay in its smoldering wake.

Back to War is a standard real-time strategy game about marshalling armies built on the backs of toiling peons. This

second expansion is a weird mix of 101 single-play missions, multiplayer, and a campaign consisting of... a tutorial. Though it's a standalone game, all you get are two new nations and eight new units. Not to intone that timeless but tired mantra, but where's the beef?

Other than the biki-ni-brief list of new features, there's nothing new to criticize that doesn't apply to the previous two titles. It's still top-heavy on detail when you consider how fast units skitter about, even with the game speed set on slow. You can mess with the speed slider, but for some odd reason, it ties screen scrolling to game speed so that the screen jerks unacceptably at slower speeds as you move around the map, leaving you no choice but to crank up the speed. Consequently, combat is usually a hectic mess with hundreds of 2D sprites disappearing into confused bunches of formlessness that slowly shrink until one side emerges victorious.

On the upside, the *Cossacks* series contains perhaps the most detail in a semi-

historical, straightforward real-time strategy game you'll find anywhere on the market. It's just too bad that *Back to War* is really just a glorified scenario collector. Nothing less than a serious campaign and better speed control might have saved it, but as it is, vets can download new scenarios for free off the net. Newcomers can check out the \$10-cheaper *Gold Edition*, which combines the original with the first expansion pack, and skip this one altogether. —Matthew Peckham



(above) Cavalry units running into attack-maxed Streltsy, also known as "charging the meat-grinder." >>> (below) Polish units (in blue) swarm a Russian village while Russian peasants brace for the slaughter.





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(above) Hey, where have I seen that inventory screen before? >>> Here! There's a lot terrain to chew up, and none of it is interesting.

exists, it's called *ShadowFlare*, and it's an episodic, but tedious, take on *Diablo II* without the attributes (or quality networking code) that made Blizzard's fantasy clickfest such a bloody good time.

ShadowFlare doesn't necessarily involve either "shadows" or "flares," but does involve treading a series of repetitive areas cordoned off by steam-

emitting machinery while slaving off endless hordes of goblins and the occasional gargoyle. Character customization is limited to three classes, each of which becomes available as you perform the requisite tasks (shoot lots of arrows to become a "ranger", cast gobs of spells to become a "mage" et al). There's also a suite of elemental attributes, which go largely underutilized outside of some basic dam-

age/resistance effects.

Assuming you survive the meandering level design and the hordes of generic foes, you have the opportunity to push onward—again, mind you, fifteen green-backs poorer—through the significantly larger but still artistically bland levels in Episode II. To developer Denyusha's credit, there's more than just goblins this time; there's also spiders, centaurs, and eventually a dragon. There are more player levels, more puzzle variety (quite a few require you to use your animal pal), more equipment, and flashier spells, but absolutely no redress for the game's amateurish level design and lack of interesting character customization.

In the end, *ShadowFlare* simply becomes a chore, lacking any depth or flair that might justify the heat energy spent in endless mouse clicking. At least one thing can be said for its pricing scheme: you only have to spend fifteen bucks to realize it's not any good.

—Douglas L. Erickson

WWE Raw

RATING



GENRE Wrestling-fighter DEVELOPER THQ
REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 500, 128MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER 2-4 Players; Same Machine
ESRB Teen

There's nothing in *WWE Raw* that's going to turn a non-fan of wrestling into one. If, however you find wrestling entertaining (in the way it is intended, not from making fun of it), it might be worth a look if it weren't for the fact that the

This pink robot with meat hooks for hands just used the "eye rake" attack on this guy.

ShadowFlare

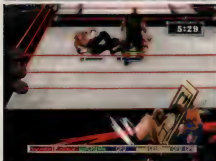
RATING



GENRE *Diablo* Clone DEVELOPER Denyusha
REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 450, 128MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER 2-4 players; Internet, LAN ESRB
Episode I-Teen, Episode II-Not Rated

Imagine, if you will, *Diablo II*, parceled into its four Acts, with each sold separately at \$15 a pop. Now imagine, not *Diablo II*, but a dull-as-dirt Japanese clone, which lacks the deep skill trees, interesting environments, and raw monster variety of its spiritual parent. Got it? Well, the awful secret is this: that game





[Top] Strut your way into the arena. [Above] Bam! Right on the dome! That's got to hurt.

game's negatives offset most of its positive elements.

Raw offers a large selection of wrestlers to choose from, but other than their appearance, there is very little to differentiate one from the other, and none have any character to speak of. There are plenty of attacks, but most are difficult to pull off due to the game's poor controls. While it offers a selection of game modes, they're virtually identical in play, the only significant difference being the number of guys going at it in the ring. There are also some puzzling features, such as in the "Women's Championship" where in you "take a female superstar through the ranks to earn the world women's title." What makes it puzzling is that it lets you play as any of the men.

For the "entertained by wrestling impaired," there's some entertainment to be had from hitting people with tables and from fighting once or twice with a hideously disfigured custom "superstar," outfitted with the funniest and most painful moves possible. Beyond that, there isn't much going on here. —Ian Lowe

Armored Task Force

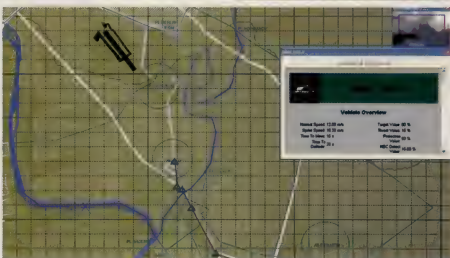
RATING



GENRE Military Planning Simulation DEVELOPER ProSIM Company REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-8 Players; Internet, LAN, Serial ESRB Not Rated

While a differential equations textbook packaged in a shiny box and sold in the game section of Best Buy probably wouldn't find many buyers, if you sold it on the Internet as a game for Smarty People Who Know Better, it would undoubtedly attract some sort of following. *Armored Task Force* is a meticulously researched, highly realistic simulation of what it's like to be at the Army War College. Except that you probably

[below] Straight into Baghdad on the sharp end of a mouse. >>> [right] It's a map-reader's nightmare from up here ...



don't buy your math professor's notes and read them for fun on Saturday night, either.

Being able to judge sight-lines on a topographical map, recognizing when to use Base Burn Dual Purpose Conventional Munitions, and knowing what TACSOP to issue to your hierarchies BMNT (Before Morning Nautical Twilight) are important skills. If you have them, it seems like an awful shame to pay a game company for the privilege of exercising them by yourself at home for free, when career soldiers actually make money at it. Unlike combat flight simulations, which simulate something viscerally enjoyable, 90% of the "fun" here is reading your orders and setting up your units. While this sequel to *BCT Commander* continues to improve the series by adding new features, like new graphics and some nice hypothetical NATO vs. Warsaw Pact scenarios (and quite possibly the best game manual ever written), when you play it you can never completely shake the feeling that you're taking a test. And when your tanks blow up, a big "X" on the map tells you that you got it wrong.

Armored Task Force is a military planning simulation, not a game. The fact that it's being marketed as one says a lot about what our society does with its leisure time. It's a decidedly postmodern attitude towards entertainment. —Bruce Geryk



So much for using the terrain as cover.

(below) Jungle graphics so good you can almost feel the onset of malaria.

Platoon

War is hell and so is this game

by Brett Todd

GENRE Real-Time Combat **DEVELOPER** Digital Reality [www.digitalreality.hu] **PUBLISHER** Strategy First [www.strategyfirst.com]

REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 600, 256MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER 2 players; Internet, LAN **ESRB** Teen

Platoon the game isn't nearly as successful as the Oliver Stone movie upon which it is based. Hungarian developer Digital Reality seems to have started out with the intriguing intention of transplanting the *Commandos* series from WWII to the jungles of Southeast Asia, but the final game is a half-witted *Diablo* set amongst rice paddies. It's a jumble of parts cobbled together with no coherent plan as to how they would work in unison.

As it is, these parts don't work together very well at all. For starters, the game only roughly resembles the movie. Though the story-driven campaign features soldiers based on the Charlie Sheen, Tom Berenger, and Willem Dafoe movie characters, names and situations have been altered. Instead of revolving around the horrors of war as experienced by Sheen's Chris Taylor, the plot focuses on how a Dear John letter depresses Sgt. Martin Lionsdale. In place of Berenger's sadistic Sgt. Barnes is a lieutenant named Whitmore who seems to have been taken from gritty, war-is-hell fare like *Major Dad*. And subbing for Dafoe's memorable Sgt. Elias is the Disney-gruff Mitchells, who landed in Vietnam by way of the IRA. Uh-huh.

Of course, games don't need coherent stories. *Platoon* would have turned out fine

even with the ridiculous plot if Digital Reality had built on core ideas that mimic the *Commandos* games. Soldiers have clearly been modeled after those in the award-winning series by Pyro Studios in that the main heroes have been given names, biographies, hit points, and special skills. Lionsdale can call in air strikes and artillery fire. Mitchells can sneak past enemies and detect booby traps. Isaac Petty can heal wounded comrades. Robert Willis can drive a tank. Even generic troops add to the talent pool. Riflemen are handy with their M-16s and specialists come equipped with M-60s and M-79 grenade launchers. The foundation is clearly laid for a game where you need to utilize these specialties to the utmost, for a game with mission maps that need to be solved like puzzles.

This is not the case. The twelve missions in the campaign have been laid out so that mindless firefights occupy most of your time. This gets frustrating fast, as there's no mid-mission save game option and you rarely choose to bring any of your units' skills into play. Missions are scripted to give you little or no freedom of choice. For example, a number of the latter expeditions begin with you forced to use Mitchells to scout ahead for the squad. This tactical decision usually makes sense, although the designers should allow gamers to make up their own minds. Your hands are tied to such an extent that you can't even select riflemen to perform duties individually. Not only does this skew historical fact, it shoehorns you into moving around the maps clumped together in one big group. Your men might as well also be shouting at the tops of their lungs, so openly are they inviting a massacre.

Regardless, most missions devolve into clickfest battles where skills aren't required. Although the game features an impressive 3D engine that does a nice job of bringing the Vietnamese jun-

gle to life, complete with camouflage ratings for every bit of scrub, much of the combat takes place in open fields. Viet Cong enemies are scattered across the maps in choice ambush positions designed to catch your squad in vulnerable positions. This makes sense from a tactical and historical point-of-view, but having to slog through one unfair ambush after another doesn't lend itself to fulfilling gameplay.

Neither does multiplayer. Digital Reality has provided a somewhat interesting multiplayer mode where you can play as either the Viet Cong or the Americans and use a pool of starting cash to purchase generic soldiers, specialists, and vehicles. But the developer hasn't provided any matching service, so you have no good way of finding an opponent unless you've got a local network and a roommate. So you're essentially limited to the campaign and the dubious ability to play each completed mission individually.

Platoon is a good idea gone wrong. Adapting the puzzle-solving conventions of the *Commandos* games to the Vietnam War—considering the surreptitious nature of the entire conflict, just imagine the intense character of the scenarios—is a fantastic notion that deserves much, much better execution than is displayed here.

UPSIDE

Good 3D engine brings to life the jungles of Southeast Asia

DOWNSIDE

Everything else

RATING

★ ★ ☆ ☆ ☆





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of the

BOX

modding off to war

The mod community signs up with *Battlefield 1942*

Surprise hits don't come any more surprising than *Battlefield 1942*. Even though Electronic Arts released the multiplayer shooter without important accessories like the software developer's kit, modders have wholeheartedly embraced the game. Fan response has been so fervent that the development team at Digital Illusions decided to take a second look at its programming and make changes that would help users further modify the game.

"Though we've always planned to support the mod community, it was a pleasant surprise to see that community develop and distribute mod tools so quickly," says Digital Illusions producer Jamil Dawsari. "We knew we had something special, but we didn't realize how quickly the gameplay and features of *Battlefield 1942* would capture the imagination of the mod-making community. With the 1.2 patch we redesigned the entire file structure of the game to support the mod community. Look for even more support from EA and Digital Illusions in the future."

As welcome as such support would be in the mod community, it could be argued that *Battlefield 1942* (along with its expansion pack, *Road to Rome*) doesn't need any added assistance. It's already one of the most popular games online, with dozens of fan websites based in all corners of the globe. Germans, French, Dutch, Danes, and, um, Australians can enjoy fan sites in their native languages, something that can't be said about most other online games, regardless of popularity. There just seems to be something universal about the latter stages of the Second World War that gets everyone excited, no matter which side your nation supported after the Japanese military took that Hawaiian holiday. Blame it on Private Ryan and *Band of Brothers*.

Regardless of cause, modding for *Battlefield 1942* has turned into a cottage industry. As Dawsari says, there are so many mods out there at the moment that "we'll have the Axis running around in pink tu-tus before too long." Check in with leading fan sites such as Battlefield1942Files.com, Battlefield Central, The Modding Theater, and Battlefield-1942.net (sprachen sie Deutsch?) and you'll find enough user-made add-ons to keep you busier than a wartime soldier pulling KP. Hundreds of skins are available, running the gamut from airplanes and tanks to individual soldiers and weapons. So if you absolutely must fight in a historically accurate Afrika Korps uniform, drive around in a King Tiger tank appropriately camouflaged for the Stalingrad winter, or fly a Mustang with nude pictures of Carmen Electra emblazoned on the wings, the options are available.

The absence of the software developer's kit means that much of what you'll find is cosmetic, although modders are beginning to push the limits

past those ever-popular skins.

CoolCommander's Heavy Bombardment mod has earned a lot of followers due to its creative addition of a flamethrower and a shotgun to a chaotic map with a lot of

airplane spawns. It was also the first mod to utilize the adjusted file structure in version 1.2. Another popular mod with version 1.2 support is Prowler's Merciless Creations series. This four-part line-up includes a blood patch with collision detection particle effects, historical tweaks to flags and load screens, and a collection of texture sets that change vehicle skins to represent different war theaters. Action Battlefield 1942 by MoonQuake pumps up everything about the default settings. There is more ammo on the map, the B-17 has been given more bombs and two additional gun turrets, respawn points have been added to all B-17s, APCs, and Hanomags so you can start right in the middle of the action, and even explosions have been jazzed up. In some ways, you haven't really played *Battlefield 1942* until you've played MoonQuake's intense mod.

And much more is on the way. Modders have already posted plans for enhancements based on G.I. Joe, the events depicted in *Black Hawk Down*, and even the *Warhammer 40,000* universe (which probably shouldn't be too much of a surprise—hasn't a *Warhammer* mod been made for every game released in the past five years?). If Electronic Arts ever gets around to giving gamers a look at the *Battlefield 1942* software developer's kit, we could be re-fighting the Second World War online for a very long time. ♦

THE MODDING THEATER

www.modthetheater.com
BATTLEFIELD1942FILES.COM
www.bf1942files.com
BATTLEFIELD-1942.NET
www.battlefield-1942.net
BATTLEFIELD CENTRAL
www.bfcentral.com

Wild, Wild Wolfenstein

Hewster and Boltyboy have been watching too many spaghetti westerns. But the modding duo has put that cinematic pastime to good use with the WildWest multiplayer mod for *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*. It shifts play from 1940s Germany to the American Wild West in the late 19th century, a time of cowboys, Indians, Mexican bandits, and Sergio Leone music.

Gameplay is more *Fistful of Dollars* than *Wild Bunch*, as the designers are hoping for a measured pace where players hide behind the tumbleweed instead of charging forward with six-guns firing. Reworked versions of the four character classes from *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* are included here, along with 11 authentic Wild West devices of destruction like the Colt revolver and sticks of dynamite. Three huge maps allow you to stage your own Eastwood-style showdowns in an abandoned mine, on the streets of a typical Old Western town, and around a Mexican governor's hacienda. Fans of LucasArts' classic *Outlaws* should have a blast with this one.

PLANET WOLFENSTEIN

www.planetwolfenstein.com
 RTCW STUFF
www.rtcwstuff.com

Eye of the Beholder Redux

Rick "Dark" Francis has used the *Neverwinter Nights* engine to recreate one of the finest role-playing games ever made. *Eye of the Beholder: Epic Edition 1.0* remakes the original in such an exacting fashion that the author has included everything but the first-person perspective. All 12 levels have been rebuilt so that owners of the strategy guide for the 1991 game will be able to use it to complete this mod.

ule. A hidden level and some side quests have been added, however, in an attempt to make the game more entertaining for a modern audience. Around 200 magical items and 14 set items geared for specific classes have also been tossed in, along with six henchmen for hire. The module has been play-balanced for between one and four players and should take around 30 hours to complete.

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS OFFICIAL SITE
nwn.bioware.com

Zoo Tycoon

Microsoft has added more free content to *Zoo Tycoon*. Fans of the decidedly cutesy take on tycoon sims can now download the Atlantean theme pack from the game's official web site. It includes a gift shop, three new sets of undersea ruins, and some new scenery that furthers the glub-glub emphasis. A barracuda has been added to the list of creatures you can keep in your menagerie. Installation of the *Marine Mania* expansion pack or the original game with the version 10.9 patch is required to run the Atlantean theme pack.

ZOO TYCOON OFFICIAL SITE
www.microsoft.com/games/zootycoon/

One-Stop Shopping for Medal of Honor

Even though Electronic Arts hasn't gotten around to releasing the software developer's kit for its bestselling *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (at least *Battlefield 1942* isn't alone), fans can still enjoy mods for the Second World War shooter. The Bondsman's *Ultipack X1.0* collects most of the essential mod files into one handy zip.

Almost every skin currently available is included, along with the most up-to-date blood patch and a nifty grenade explosion patch called Zero's Cool Boom Mod. Two other one-stop-shopping files for *Medal of Honor* are the TMT Map Pack, which gathers together six top fan-made maps, and Lexi's Map Assault 2002 Map Pack, which features the 13 maps submitted to 3DGaming.de's "Map Assault 2002" contest. Planet Medal of Honor is the best place to go for these files and just about everything else relating to the hit series.

PLANET MEDAL OF HONOR
www.planetmedalofhonor.com

Make Madden a BMOG

Still haven't gotten enough college football? If the New Year's blitz of bowl games wasn't enough to satisfy your NCAA jones, surf to Football Gaming and download the 32-team NCAA Roster and Artwork mod for *Madden NFL 2003*. The 1.8MB file replaces the default NFL clubs with the biggest and best clubs from across the nation, including the likes of Oklahoma, Miami, Notre Dame, and Alabama. Rosters are accurate to mid-October, 2002, giving you the opportunity to re-stage those crucial late-season contests.

FOOTBALL GAMING
www.football-gaming.com

BARGAIN BIN

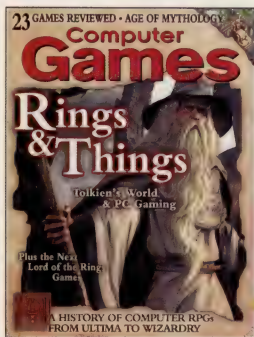
Warrior Kings

Black Cactus's *Warrior Kings* is a good game that didn't find an audience. As a result, the medieval real-time strategy game is now available in a bargain bin near you for around 10 bucks—a great deal considering you get a dynamic campaign, tough missions, and a 3D engine powerful enough to depict epic battles. [Microdisks 2002]



Whoever said beauty was in the eye of the beholder never got a look at this guy. >>> Take on banditos in WildWest for *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*.





We received a lot of feedback about January's editorial "Pure Sex" and the big cover story, "Rings & Things." Melissa Fernandez felt the latter article shorted MUDs, which it did, but most people pointed out games we omitted from the "History" section. For example, Vern Russell championed the almost forgotten Amulet of Yendor. However, the most egregious omission, noted by many—including, not surprisingly, New World Computing—was the complete exclusion of the Might and Magic series, which was an unfortunate oversight. Moving on, here are this month's letters.

Letters of Yore

While there is little doubt that games like *Neverwinter Nights* are part of the future of role-playing, I must disagree with the characterization of MUDs as a thing "of the early 90s." For many years, up to the present, the MUD community has maintained a strong presence on the web, providing seasoned role-players and novices alike a chance to interact and roleplay, most often without the monetary commitment involved with games like *Asheron's Call*, *EverQuest* and *Neverwinter Nights*. One has only to take a glance at *OtherSpace* (telnet address: jointhesaga.com port: 1790) to see what can be accomplished using this medium. An interactive storyline extending back nearly five years, it's managed to succeed as both a concept and a game, now home to over 200 players from around the globe, some of whom have been a part of this gaming world since its inception. Most importantly *OtherSpace* and games like it provide a place where young gamers can be introduced to the sometimes complicated world of RPGs with little or no pressure, while still having the benefit of older more experienced players.

Melissa Fernandez

I think you have missed a point with this article. The "original" games, whether card and dice and a dungeon master, or text such as Infocom's *Zork*,

had one thing most modern games do not: no requirement for twitch and jerk teenage reaction times. There were requirements for thinking, logic and making choices, and these types of games are few and far between today.

If I can make a comparison, what is the best automobile? For an enthusiast it might be an Italian or German 200 mph sports car, or a slightly slower Corvette. For most of us, it is a minivan or SUV. The majority of games are for enthusiasts, not for most of us.

The next "killer app," one that will kick start the industry, will be a series of games most of us can play. It won't have complicated character choices and setup (race, class, weapons, etc.), no beta shipments (no patches!). Instead, it will be a CD you put in your machine and it runs.

Should I add a wish for world peace?

Tom Van Natta

I was surprised to see Neil Randall's mention of the strategic board game *Diplomacy* in a computer-games magazine, especially in an article about fantasy role-playing games. But then I realized that it actually has much in common with *Dungeons & Dragons*: both games are more about the interaction between the players than the actual mechanics of the game, and both games have been made more accessible and convenient by the transition to online play.

Diplomacy is still enjoyed in cutthroat face-to-face tournaments all over the world, but most games now happen in cyberspace. Unlike the real-time play of modern online role-playing games, online *Diplomacy* proceeds at a leisurely pace, with only a few turns per week, while the players wrangle with each other via email. And best of all, it's free!

Those looking for a different sort of gaming obsession are welcome to join the *Diplomacy* hobby. You can get started at www.diplom.org

Rod Spade

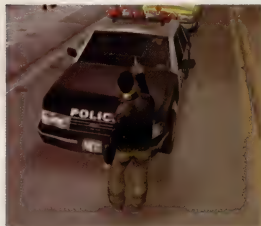
Pure Reality!

Steve Bauman's "Upfront" editorial "Pure Sex!" splashes some reality on those who want to blame the fantasy of videogames on the world's evil. Shooting a fantasy M16 in a computer game, he points out, with a mouse and keyboard doesn't make one a real life marksman. True enough. But truth is not as one dimensional as a videogame.

From "The Grand Rapids Press," Michigan, on December 8, was the story of two young men ran down a random victim, a bicyclist, with a car. (Just before that, they were going to run down a woman delivering newspapers but she was spared as she was known to them. They also tried to run down a couple, strolling near a restaurant, who escaped by jumping to safety.) The attackers later returned to the still unconscious victim

to beat and kicked him into a coma. (The 38-year-old father-of-three victim died six days later.)

Would this scenario sound familiar to a "Computer Games magazine" reader? Can you guess favorite videogame of the attackers? Would you believe ... *Grand Theft Auto*? Can you guess what they did just before their rampage? That's right, they played *Grand Theft Auto*. Can you guess what they did after their rampage? That's right, they played *Grand Theft Auto*. But truth is not as one dimensional as a videogame.



Both of the attackers were drinking the night of the attack. One was unemployed, divorced, and was prevented from seeing his child. Both had history of trouble with the law, for things like assault, burglary, and car theft. One admitted to the attacks but no mention was made of the videogame. The other refused to talk to police. But these miscreants are only two out the hundreds of thousands who play that socially irredeemable game. Not bad, statistically speaking. Truth is not as one dimensional as a videogame.

But is there a link between real life actions and fantasy world videogames? Yes, that link is the mind. As a wise man once said, "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Whether with people, books, movies, or videogames, perhaps we are the company we keep.

Arthur Aspromatis

I am always amazed that people think computer games cause crime. In 1982, I bought my first computer for the main purpose of gaming. Guess how many times I have been arrested since. None. I think it is quite a leap from sniping on *Day of Defeat* to sniping in the suburbs.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't the U.S. court system just rule that virtual child pornography is not a crime since it is covered under the First Amendment as free speech? Surely this sort of filth is preparing someone to be a child molester to a far greater extent than *Unreal Tournament* is preparing me to wage war. Jack Thompson apparently does not realize that video games are

Whether with people, books, movies, or videogames, perhaps we are the company we keep.

harmless fun. If he wants a crusade, let him stop the pornography on the Internet.

After playing *Space Invaders*, I never took a pot shot at a marauding alien. After playing

Civilization, I never launched an attack on a neighboring city. Oddly enough, when someone tells me that busybodies are trying to outlaw my hobby, I start to get violent urges.

Dr. Neal Irwin

Whoa there, pardner. If you buy into the argument that virtual child pornography "prepares" someone to be a child molester, you have to consider the possibility that games can also "prepare" someone to be a killer. Clearly the intersection of virtual and real lives is certainly a topic worth of a lot of discussion and research. —ed

Call the Cops

Could you mention something about bringing back police adventure games in your magazine? I can't even begin to count all of the police dramas on TV, from *NYPD Blue* to *Cops*. People are interested in police work. I'm sure there's many people who would love to play a game as a police officer without actually having to become one.

I know, I know, it's already been done, but can you imagine what it would be like with today's technology?

Just think, you could patrol the streets using the city environments from *Grand Theft Auto*. You could have car/foot chases, fights, arrests that are made both easily and difficultly, and countless other scenarios. Plus, with a random crime generator, the situations would never get old. There could be career mode or simply drive around and bust bad guys mode.

Maybe it's just me, but I think this game would be a top-seller if it came out.

Nick Szopko

More Preview Editions

This is my special preview version suggestion for the preview version suggestion request suggestion. Consider your-

self lucky to have this advance *Computer Games Magazine*-only version! [txtError5 reinitialize hotkeys-system toilet 679 flushed]

Matt Welch

ERRATA

We failed to credit Moby Games (www.mobygames.com) as the source for much of the historical artwork in January's "Rings & Things" cover feature, and in February's retrospective on Legend Entertainment. We regret the error.

ADVERTISER INDEX

Axeel Tribe (www.axeeltribe.com)	31
Building Your Computer (www.bycvission.com)	75
CDV (www.cdv.de)	19
Chips & Bits (www.chipsbits.com)	97, 99
Creative Labs (www.creative.com)	Back Cover
Dreamcatcher (www.dreamcatchergames.com)	57
Earthlink (www.earthlink.net)	91
Eidos (www.eidos.com)	28-29
Electronic Arts (www.ea.com)	20-21, 24-25
iGames (www.igames.com)	11
Infogrames (www.infogrames.com)	8-9
Microsoft (www.microsoft.com)	6-7
Sony (station.sony.com)	24-25
Strategy First (www.strategyfirst.com)	4-5, 35, Inside Back
Velocity Micro (www.velocitymicro.com)	73
Vivendi Universal (www.blacklabelgames.com)	43, 45, 47
Westwood Studios (www.westwood.com)	13-15

road to nowhere

killer kids

How the videogame industry trains the next generation of snipers

Anyone who has followed Miami lawyer Jack Thompson's trail through the last decade saw him move from a crusade against "dirty R&R lyrics" and Janet Reno's sexual preference to finger pointing at violence in videogames. His favorite target? *America's Army*. Well, Mr. Thompson, you've got a lot more to worry about than that. Let's cut to a scene in the Thompson living room.

"Mommy, I wanna learn how to shoot somebody in the head!"

"That's nice dear."

"No, really, Mom. Santa only brought me *Super Mario Sunshine*, where 'soothing sunshine, accompanied by the sound of waves gently breaking on the shore, joins clouds, high above, with seagulls turning lazy circles in a clear blue sky.'"

"Oh come on, now. Your father...uh, I mean Santa... brought you the \$69.95, red-hot *Super Mario Sunshine*™ Bundle Pak. With a compass in the stock and this thing that... tells time. Er, maybe not, but you know what I mean. You know that it gets more exciting than that."

"Yeah OK fine. But helping the falsely accused Mario to tidy up Delfino Island, take on 'baddies,' and lend his nozzle in all kinds of sticky situations as he hovers, spin jumps, blasts off, and squirts, is just not what I had in mind."

"So what *did* you have in mind?"

"I wanna learn how to shoot somebody in the shoulder and see his arm fly off..."

"Tsk tsk tsk."

"...and then shoot him in the head..."

"Hmmm."

"And then he collapses in a pool of blood! And then I grab and use his bloody dead corpse as a human shield so his allies can't git at me! And then he explodes and... Way cool!"

"I'm really disappointed in you. *'Git at me!'* Who learned you how to talk, anyway? Note my intentional use of irony, son. And another thing. Using the phrase 'dead corpse.' There aren't too many live corpses that I've ever seen."

"What about *Night of the Living Dead*?"

"You're missing the point."

"No you're missing the point."

"No you."

"No you."

"Jaaaaaack! Could you come here for a moment?"

Ever since studies have shown proof positive that *DOOM* caused the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School, all the would-be mass-murderers, snipers in the rough, burgeoning killers, and larval postal-slayers—most of them in the third grade—have rejoiced. After all, haven't they been desensitized right from the age of cognizance about violence by having been fed a diet of videos, cartoons, and movies in which somebody is shot, stabbed, or murdered? Don't they go to PG rated films where they happily munch on popcorn and chocolate covered raisins while the victims on the screen bleed to death? Positive reinforcement. That's what'll help build the next generation of schoolyard killers.

Rather than forcing them to wait until the military releases *America's Army*

2012, the extra-civilized way to learn the ropes of the Wonderful World of Warfare, we as a society can provide them with better tools now.

Today. Military personnel have

historically been trained via operant conditioning to shoot to kill when the target pops suddenly into view—using silhouettes on a rifle range, perhaps. This is exactly the same as a kid is trained in *Doom*-, *Duke Nukem*-, *Quake*-, and *Castle Wolfenstein*-style games (et al, ad infinitum). Exactly the same reflexes, exactly the same skills. Put a rifle into the kid's hands and he's good to go.

Activision, id, Sony, John Carmack himself, and Eidos, among others, are jointly and severally responsible for getting weapons into kids' hands as early as possible. Their every intention is to sell the love of violence to a target market of everyone under 16 years of age. In fact, they have banded together with New Line Cinema to help produce this summer's upcoming blockbuster, *Kidz & Carnage*, *Gunz & Gore*, releasing around the same time as Disney-Pixar's production of *Finding Nemo*.

Mobles with visions of bloodbath and butchery must dangle above every crib. I have glorious visions of camouflage undershirts and khaki diapers getting caught on the barbed wire surrounding every playpen. All of this and more should be just the beginning of their "training." When they graduate from gattling rattles to videogame violence tutorials, they'll be just about ready to slaughter one another. Get rid of the metal detectors in every school, and there you have it—trained snipers and a fertile killing field.

They receive their first issue; move confidently to the virtual "front." Thanks to first-person shooters, they're ready to fight. But wait. What's this? No mouse look? No right click? They can't toggle between their M-9 semiautomatic and their M-4 Carbine? And where's the reload key? Maybe we'd better rethink this.

So, to Jack Thompson and friends, are we missing the point?

"No, you." ●



www.chipsbits.com

Monthly Specials

Panzer Campaigns 7: Kursk '43

PC - HPS Sims

HPS Simulations and John Tiller are proud to announce the release of Kursk '43, an operational level World War II simulation. Kursk '43 covers the gigantic German Summer Offensive in 1943, when they attempted to cut off the huge bulge in the Soviet lines near the town of Kursk. This is without question the largest Panzer Campaign game in the series, as the action over the entire bulge (north and south offensives) is covered.



\$39⁹⁵



Napoleonic Battles 3: Campaign Wagram - PC

HPS Sims

HPS Simulations is proud to announce the upcoming release of Napoleonic Battles 3: Campaign Wagram, a John Tiller Game. In 1809, after a successful campaign about Eckmühl, Napoleon had reached Vienna and was ready to gain final victory over the Austrian army. But Archduke Charles and his army were in place across the Danube River and ready to give battle. The resulting battles of Aspern-Essling and Wagram would be the largest battles in history at the time. Will Napoleon's reputation of invincibility be continued or will these battles result in his first significant setback?

\$39⁹⁵

Naval Campaigns 2: Tsushima - PC

HPS Sims

HPS Simulations is proud to announce the upcoming release of "Naval Campaigns 2: Tsushima." At the end of May in 1905, after sailing halfway around the world, the Russian Baltic Fleet arrived in the straits of Tsushima to do battle with the Japanese Imperial Navy. This battle would decide the outcome of the Russo-Japanese War at sea. The clash of Admiral Togo's fleet with that of Admiral Rozhdestvensky's would be one of the most decisive naval battles in history.

\$39⁹⁵



\$44⁹⁵

All American: 82nd Airborne in Normandy - PC

Shrapnel

The eagerly awaited sequel to 101: The Airborne Invasion of Normandy will take you north and east of the 101st Airborne action as the brave soldiers of the All American division attempt to take Ste. Mere Eglise, bridgeheads spanning the Merderet River, and many other varied and trying missions.

INSIDE the sausage factory

my first decade

10 years of Jerry Lewis, Showbiz, and trade show drinking contests

In February 1993, I was a couple years out of college, wrapping up a failed business venture and waiting for an acceptance into grad school. With extra time on my hands, I decided to teach myself C programming and, to give myself a more concrete goal, I decided to write a simple game. Initially, I started making a variant of the old "Snake" game (snake eats apples and gets longer), but after three days, I switched to a knock-off of my favorite board game, *Squad Leader*. I never did get accepted to grad school, but I finished my game, it was published, and somehow I wandered into the strange career of game developer. Here are some of the more interesting memories from my first 10 years:

■ ...the movie sounded like a complete dud, an obscure sci-fi flick with two barely-known lead actors and a bizarre plot. Of course, I turned him down. The movie, *Men in Black*, went on to become the biggest grossing sci-fi movie since *Star Wars*. ■

Jerry Lewis Saves the Day In September 1995, I was finishing the coding of the first big-budget game I'd ever been involved with. Unfortunately, there were bugs in the code and the game was four days late for the duplicators already. A drop dead date had been set for Monday—the game would ship then, bugs or not. But it was still crashing on some testers' machines—though not mine—every two hours or so. Without a pattern to the crashes, or even the ability to replicate them on my own machine, I hopelessly watched the hours tick by. Jerry Lewis' Labor Day Telethon was on TV, and I donated \$100, hoping to change my karma. Within a couple hours, I got a call from testing with an exact series of steps to force the crash. Now able to reproduce it easily on my machine, it turned out to be an easy fix, and the game went out cleanly on Monday. I'll never poke fun at a Jerry Lewis movie again.

Show Biz In 1997, all the soothsayers were predicting an imminent takeover of the game business by Hollywood. I had just finished making some niche-y strategy games when I was approached by a Hollywood producer-type—he was probably the assistant executive junior key grip—who was trying to get a licensed game produced for the movie he was involved with. Unfortunately, it was an action movie, and I made strategy games. The movie was also due for release in less

than three months. Finally, the movie sounded like a complete dud, an obscure sci-fi flick with two barely-known lead actors and a bizarre plot. Of course, I turned him down. The movie, *Men in Black*, went on to become the

biggest grossing sci-fi movie since *Star Wars*. I guess I'd better stick to games.

E3 Madness, Part I 1998 was the peak year for PC game madness and Electronic Entertainment Expo extravaganzas. E3 was an orgy of big dollars spent poorly, and the biggest harlot was a game called *Space Bunnies Must Die*. At E3 that year, 30 foot-tall *Space Bunnies* posters hung from every rafter, and the game was prominently promoted in the E3 circulars and tabloids. Our game, *Railroad Tycoon II*, was signed to a publisher who had only gotten the funding to pay for their tiny booth three days before the show, and we were located in the secondary hall, drowned out by 2000-watt loudspeakers for neighboring displays. Still, there is some justice in the world. *Railroad Tycoon II* won best strategy game of the show and is still selling well to this day. *Space Bunnies* flopped, and its publisher had closed down by the next E3.

E3 Madness, Part Deux At E3 in 2000, our publisher was rebelling against the E3 system by renting a parking lot across the street, setting up a series of RVs in the lot, and showing their games there, along with dancing midgets and plenty of alcohol to lure show-goers away from the main hall. We had been crunching hard to get *Tropico* ready for the show, but hadn't quite made it. The first day, it was crashing every five minutes or so. Our last demo was at 7PM, and the rest of our team headed off with the Finnish developers of *Max Payne* for a drinking contest. (Never get into a drinking contest with a Finn.) I locked myself in the trailer after the lot was supposed to be legally closed and debugged *Tropico* until about midnight. For the next two days, it only crashed about once every 15 minutes, which is an acceptable rate for a pre-alpha version. And I was the only one who wasn't hung over.

Here's hoping the next decade proves as interesting as the last. ●

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\$49⁹⁵



Dark Eye of Camelot
Shrouded in Espionage
PC - Titan

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Star Wars Bounty Hunter
PS2 - Lucas Arts

\$49⁹⁵



Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness
PS2 - Eidos

\$49⁹⁵



Batman Dark Tomorrow
PS2 - Jumbo

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Star Wars Clone Wars
PS2 - Lucas Arts

\$49⁹⁵



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PS2 - Rock Star Games

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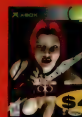
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GBA - THQ

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Legend of Zelda: Link to the Past
GBA - Nintendo

\$36⁹⁵

THREE finger salute dead again

The annual "PC gaming is dead" knell

My friend Trevor has been telling me that PC games are dead. As evidence, he showed me his list of the top ten games of 2002. Over half of them were console titles. He asked how I could possibly have a top ten list without including *Metroid Prime*, *Splinter Cell*, or *Vice City*. When I told him that I had separate lists for PC games and console games, he laughed. He asked why I didn't just go ahead and do a list for each system. Trevor says that the PC is just another system, like the Sega Dreamcast, and that it's going to have to learn to assimilate, like Puerto Rico, or in ten years no one will use it for anything but checking email and playing those Flash games where Michael Jackson drops babies.

Trevor's newfound predilection for console systems might have something to do with his recent purchase of a 55-inch rear projection TV and all three console systems. He used the severance pay he got after his company downsized him. He said it was the best way he could think to ride out the economy. And plus he needed to keep his

didn't really know, but no one ever died playing it. I asked him why it was number eight on his list of top ten games of 2002 and he said it was because he'd heard so much about it.

When I reminded him that a gamepad won't work with certain popular genres like real-time strategy, he scoffed. He asked if I've ever seen what you have to do in *Tony Hawk* to pull off a half-booger nelson trip-grind 360 nutsack twist. After that, he said, a huntress rush in *WarCraft III* is nothing and you could probably even get *Falcon 4.0* to work on a gamepad. As long as you made liberal use of the shoulder buttons. I asked him who Tony Hawk was. He said he wasn't really sure but it had something to do with skateboards.

Trevor said that computers have had it coming. After years of buying bigger monitors and better sound cards, one day you realize you already have a huge screen and some nice speakers in your living room. He said there's no point wasting a TV on just watching TV and that people expect more interactivity from their electronics. He told me you could even play *SSX* on cell phones. I asked him what *SSX* was and he said it was a game you could play on a cell phone.

But then I find Trevor in the chair at his computer, listing to the right and playing *Neverwinter Nights*, holding his left thumb in a coffee mug full of ice. He says he thinks he sprained it and that console games simply aren't ergonomic enough to be played for any length of time. He explains how PC games are better for third-party content, sophisticated gameplay, and flexible interfaces. He asks how much those Aeron Flux chairs go for these days and wonders if maybe someone would do a straight up trade for his Xbox and a copy of *Halo* and *DOA Xtreme Beach Volleyball*. ●

“...people routinely die in Korean Internet cafes from playing *EverQuest* for days at a time without getting a drink of water or even using the bathroom.”

fingers in the cultural zeitgeist of America's pulse. He said that you don't see *Newsweek* or *Maxim* writing about *Age of Mythology* or *No One Lives Forever 2*. When I pointed out that they probably did write about those games, he replied that yeah, they probably did, but not so much as they wrote about how cool the Xbox was and that there were strippers in *BMX XXX*. I asked him what *BMX XXX* was and he said it was a game with strippers in it.

I also suspect Trevor prefers console gaming for the comfort factor. He has a folding metal chair in front of his computer. The chair slumps to one side because one of the legs is buckled. When I told him he could have used his money to buy a more comfortable chair, he said I just didn't get it, that PC games were designed specifically to keep you hooked even when you're uncomfortable. He pointed out that people routinely die in Korean Internet cafes from playing *EverQuest* for days at a time without getting a drink of water or even using the bathroom. He said you never hear of that happening to people who are playing *Animal Crossing*. I asked him what *Animal Crossing* was and he said he

TRUST IS A WEAKNESS

"I am a hacker, enter my world..."

Yes, I am a criminal. My crime is that of curiosity. My crime is that of judging people by what they say and think, not what they look like. My crime is that of outsmarting you, something that you will never forgive me for.

I am a hacker, and this is my manifesto."

Excerpt from the "Hacker's Manifesto"
- written by the Mentor



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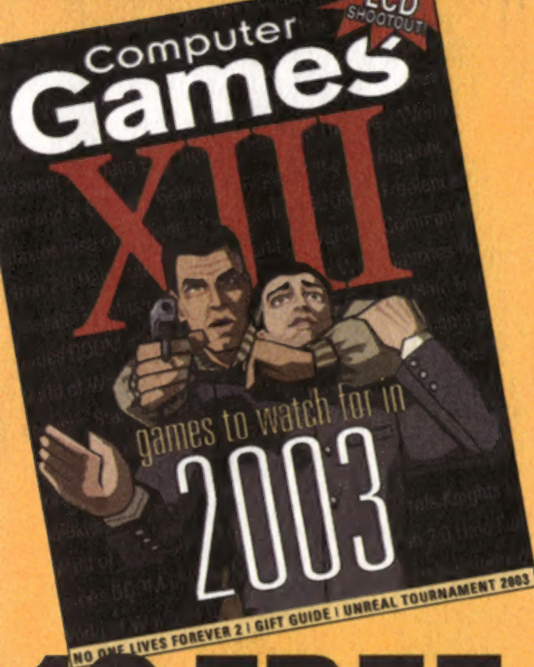
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